**University of Alberta**

# Beyond Orientalism: Identity Politics in Asian American Diasporic Literature

by

January Yee Hiong Lim

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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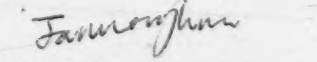

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**Abstract**

This thesis locates Asian American texts as a site where inquiries can be posed about the preservation of paternal authority and the investment of the closet, about the regulation of identities and disciplining forces of power, about feminist re-visioning of self and whiteness, and about feminist perspective between "here" (America) and "there" (Asia). It argues that diasporic works by Ang Lee, Chay Yew, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim disrupt the notion of Asian Americanness and Asian American identity in the sense that they explore new locations outside the domestic boundaries of America. In so doing, these texts worked to produce, mediate, and contest particular forms and ideologies of racial embodiment and identity politics. This thesis draws on the critical apparatus of queer theory as well as the insights of Asian and African feminism and cultural criticism in order to consider a more complicated idea of the transnational forces and pressures on identity politics, communal affiliations, and cultural interventions.

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Table of Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | Orientalism, Diaspora, Sexuality, and Identity Politics | 1 |
| Chapter One | Father Knows Best: Reading Sexuality in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and Chay Yew's *Porcelain* | 13 |
| Chapter Two | "Talking Back": Body, Feminism, and Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* | 68 |
| Conclusion | | 116 |
| Works Cited | | 120 |

# Introduction

## Orientalism, Diaspora, Sexuality, and Identity Politics

"I thought the Chinese were supposed to be shy and quiet," mutters a Caucasian guest at the wedding banquet.

--*The Wedding Banquet*

So we should read feminist memoirs as conscious acts of rebellion.

--Jill Ker Conway

Describing his encounter with a spectator after the closing of *A Language of Their Own* at New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater in 1994, Chay Yew indicates he is "[w]ell-versed in identity politics—particularly the issue of 'Orientalism'": "Some 60-year-old guy came up to me after seeing *Language* at the Public and said, 'I really like your play but I wanted to know about Asian peoples and the Asian continent.' I thought, 'God, what am I? An Asian almanac or some walking PBS documentary like *The Silk Route*?'" (Drukman 1, 2). Interestingly, when Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* was screened in America in 1993, it came with "promotional fortune cookie giveaways in theater lobbies" (Rosenfeld 1). Richard Corliss, a *Time* film critic, wrote upon the film's release: "With their glimpses of swirling silks, their rapid clatter of languages, their arranged marriages, fatal renunciations, invocations of ghosts and ancestors, aphorisms straight out of a fortune cookie from one of the better Chinese restaurants, *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Joy Luck Club* look beautifully alien" (1). Asian peoples, Silk Route,

swirling silks, fortune cookies, and Orientalism. These are indicators of the geopolitical significance of "the Orient" in the American cultural imaginary.

Edward Said characterizes the Orient as a "European invention," "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences," and one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). Said posits that Orientalism operates as disciplinary practice "for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Orientalism, Said argues, is "an exclusively male province," where "women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (207). In Saidian gendered discourses and masculine imperial rhetoric, the Orient invites "penetration [and] insemination" (219).

Said's theoretical critique of Orientalism is formulated on a heterosexual power relation paradigm, in which he assumes sexual desire to be male, situating masculinity as always powerful. Using this Western heterosexual configuration, Said constructs women as passive, compliant, and sexually accessible, bifurcating the world neatly between two geographical areas that stereotypically position male and female within the mind/body gender system. Said's theoretical model problematically assumes men are autonomous and desiring agents, whose masculinity controls and dominates the bodies of women. While Said argues that the Orient exists as a space of "sexual fantasy" where heterosexual men "look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe," "a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden," he neglects homosexual and

homoerotic discourses in his conception of Orientalist fantasies (190). Thus, I include same-sex sexuality as a way of broadening the critique and treatment of sexuality and Orientalism in Asian American literary works. My study of Asian American identity politics takes Orientalism beyond Said's heterosexual presumptions by incorporating feminist and queer counterhegemonic imperatives in pursuing gender and sexual issues. Rather than a static discourse and male domain, Orientalism is always changing and in flux within the Asian American diaspora. By "discourse," I refer to Michel Foucault's definition, treating "it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements" (*Archaeology* 80).

To use Said's concept more productively in my reading of diasporic texts, I use the term "Orientalism" to draw attention to the construction of the exotic Orient in different contexts, geographical sites, and historical moments, and to think critically about the various discourses of power relations. I foreground the ways in which women and men turn their gaze to white subjects, questioning white notions of masculinity. At the same time, I take note of these diasporic subjects' interimplicated investments in gender and racial differences. My intention in considering a more complex idea of identity politics and the intersection of queerness and diaspora, then, responds not only to expanding the field of Asian American studies and inquiry, but also to the frequent elision of sexuality in literary criticism. In interrogating the patriarchal rhetorical power structures and notions of heteronormativity disseminated by hegemonic discourses in the diaspora, I mean to press on existing analyses to incorporate transgressive elements that are often excluded from the purview of cultural critique. My use of the term

"hegemony" is drawn from the Asian American cultural work of Lisa Lowe, who writes: "Hegemony does not refer exclusively to the process by which a dominant group exercises its influence but refers equally to the process through which emergent groups organize and contest any specific hegemony. . . . We might say that hegemony is not only the political process by which a particular group constitutes itself as 'the one' or 'the majority' in relation to which 'minorities' are defined and know themselves to be 'other,' but is equally the process by which various and incommensurable positions of otherness may ally and constitute a new majority, a 'counterhegemony'" (69). It is precisely this counterhegemonic aspect that I intend to underscore in my critical reading of Asian American cultural production. The three texts I analyze from this perspective present writers with a diasporic consciousness, whose works articulate homoerotic and homosexual possibilities, allow both male and female diasporic subjects to reinscribe or break down patriarchal discourse, produce counterhegemonic discourse and knowledge, and re-vision a self, a subject of discourse, that is in opposition to a Western taxonomous system that constructs the "Other."

Together with the rapidly shifting political terrain of identity politics, the diaspora debate has been seething since the late 1990s. I will briefly highlight three theoretical concepts of diaspora so as to elucidate their relevance to explicating the tensions and conflicts of Asian American diasporic works. Ien Ang tells us in her oft-quoted article, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora," that "[d]iasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original 'homeland'" (5).

In "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak characterizes '"the new diaspora"' or "new transnationality" as "Eurocentric migration, labour export both male and female, border crossings, the seeking of political asylum, and the haunting in-place uprooting of 'comfort women' in Asia and Africa" (245). Within the current globalized political economy, Spivak's construct of the new diaspora provides a useful model for rethinking the movements of transnational capital and labor, especially the deployment and trafficking of Third World women's geobodies in procreative reproduction and domestic service.[1] Shirley Geok-lin Lim proposes a diasporic model of reading Asian American works in "Immigration and Diaspora." According to Lim, the discourse of diasporas encompasses a "transnational consciousness" that exemplifies "the dynamics of an evolving global technology capable of transmitting information simultaneously through mass media to geographically separate yet culturally related peoples" (298, 297). Citing Edward Said's idea of "filiation" (natal ties) and "affiliation" (social relations), Lim asserts that notions of "identity," "home," and "nation" emerge differently in narratives by immigrants/diasporic subjects and in texts by "second-generation writers" (296, 299). American-born writers such as Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, and Monica Sone, Lim argues, "plot the acculturation of their Asian protagonists into a U. S. society represented as desirable, fetishistically possessable, and offering

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[1] I understand the vexed question of using the term "Third World," a reference that generalizes and homogenizes women in developing countries, delimiting the possibilities of knowledge about their experience and status. Nevertheless, I use "Third World" self consciously and only for lack of a better term, with the recognition that this entity is contested and reconfigured both within and outside political and academic discourses.

utopionist possibilities" (299).

I recognize the limits, homogenizing implications, and historical specificities of "diaspora" as a discursive concept that is still undergoing extensive debate. In this thesis, I use diaspora in a way that includes contemporary trends and a global/transnational matrix of affiliations: movement of bodies to and from homeland and across different borders; mobility of cultural, economic, and intellectual capital; and commodification of bodies and sexuality. The central argument in this thesis is that the three diasporic works I discuss represent the different ways in which Asian American subjects manage, perform, reconfigure, and invest strategically particular racial and sexual identifications in a contemporary phenomenon of transnationalism.

In response to her students' evaluations of her Asian American courses, Shirley Geok-lin Lim admits that she has not been "as willing to include sexuality" in her teaching of Asian American texts ("Asian-American" 48). Rather, her choice of works "are usually about heterosexual families and relations" (48). This hesitation in using sexuality as an investigative methodology for thinking about gender, racial, and sexual identity formation across a horizon of multiple differences within academic discourse was endemic. Lim remarks: "In fact, recent criticism of Asian-American writing, such as Sauling Wong's and King-Kok Cheung's studies and the edited volume *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,* does not discuss gay and lesbian representations" ( 47). "Homophobia," Lim notes, "as in the almost complete invisibility of gay representations, is acutely evident in Asian-American culture" (48). She acknowledges that an ""add-on' approach to sexuality at best reproduces the marginalization of gay, lesbian, and bisexual subjects and at worst distorts and confuses others further" (48). Mapping the discursive

development of Asian American scholarship, King-Kok Cheung's observation resonates with Lim's view, taking note that "discussions around themes of sexual orientation have remained relatively hushed until recently" ("Re-Viewing" 12).

The launching of a special issue by *Amerasia Journal* entitled "Dimensions of Desire: Other Asian and Pacific American Sexualities" in 1994 gestures to what David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom call "sporadic and divided" critical attention to queer sexuality in Asian American literary studies (8). In the introduction to *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, the first collection of writings that considers "both racial identities and sexual differences," Russell Leong asserts: "Popular ideas around Asian American homosexuality have been confounded with broader notions of exotic Asian or 'oriental' sexuality, especially in popular culture, film, and media" (3).[2] Yet, homosexuality, as Eng and Hom insist, "is never just about sex or sexuality" (9). Rather, they posit that a serious approach to the study of sexuality in Asian American literature must consider sex and sexuality in conjunction with "other types of social alterities," particularly race (10). Citing Lisa Lowe, Eng and Hom argue that nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration exclusion and juridical mechanisms precluded Asian American immigrant laborers from "normative conceptions of masculinity legally defined as 'white' (for example, normative heterosexuality, nuclear family formations, entitlement to community)" (5). In this sense, discourses on non-normative sexuality not only impact on contemporary Asian American subjects who are

---

[2] A number of articles from "Dimensions of Desire," *Amerasia Journal* 20.1 (1994), are reprinted in this interdisciplinary collection.

queer, but also "affect a much larger Asian American constituency as well—regardless of sexual identity or identifications—whose disavowed status as legitimate or proper subjects of the U. S. nation-state render them abnormal as such" (6). Eng and Hom use the term "queer" "to refer to a political practice based on transgressions of the normal and normativity rather than a straight/gay binary of heterosexual/homosexual identity" (1).

As a critical apparatus for my analysis of Asian American diasporic texts, queerness as a reading methodology also involves acts of resistance against cultural, legal, and paternal discipline and management of bodies and sexuality, an attention to cultural, racial, and gendered differences, and a critique of identity politics. As Judith Butler emphasizes in *Bodies That Matter,* it is necessary to interrogate as inter-implicated the social management of race and the ways in which same-sex sexuality is prohibited:

> Rejecting those models of power which would reduce racial differences to the derivative effects of sexual difference . . . it seems crucial to rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested. Especially at those junctures in which a compulsory heterosexuality works in the service of maintaining hegemonic forms of racial purity, the "threat" of homosexuality takes on a distinctive complexity. (18)

If a normative heterosexualizing imperative secures its discursive power through its association with whiteness, then the regulation of sexuality or closeting of the Asian diasporic male points to the urgency of bloodline preservation, anxieties about cultural

loss, and a return to imaginary "Chineseness." Thus, patrilineal anxieties, cultural politics, pressures emanating from both inside and outside of the diaspora, and survival within existing institutional structures of power represent aspects of contesting and destructuring the hegemony of material and psychic domination.

The demographic and political landscape of the U. S. has been changed drastically since the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, resulting in shifting Asian American identity from American-born to a predominantly foreign-born paradigm. I select three non-canonical texts from writers who came to the U. S. as students and originated from heterogeneous homelands. Specifically, Ang Lee, Chay Yew, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim were born and raised in the Chinese diaspora in Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia respectively. Cheung remarks that Asian Americans, taking cognizance of their racial difference, "feel, to this day, the need to prove their Americanness by shedding their originary culture and by setting themselves apart from new Asian immigrants" ("Re-Viewing" 6). Unlike American-born Asian Americans, then, the diasporic consciousness of Lee, Yew, and Lim is connected to their homelands in a tangible way through such valences as transnational mobility; cultural, community, and economic support; and linguistic accents.[3] Their diasporic works disrupt the notion

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[3] Lee, Yew, and Lim first gained fame and recognition outside the domestic locale of America: Lee won first and second prizes for his screenplays, *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet* in a script competition organized by the Taiwanese government. His first three movies are funded by the Taiwanese film community. Yew's *Porcelain* was first produced in London, winning awards in the process. A prolific self-identified Malayan writer, Lim has won awards for her fiction in Asia. Both Lim and Yew are important literary figures in Southeast Asia, and their literary works are part of the Commonwealth Literature canon.

of Asian Americanness and Asian American identity in the sense that they explore new locations outside the domestic borders of America. As a strategy to contest the mainstream discursive determination of a homogeneous Asian American identity, these diasporic narratives depict Asian American characters as heterogeneous subjects, who position their identities strategically for political, social, economic, or intellectual purposes. Because of their political and cultural invisibility in America, these characters embrace a diasporic identity, one that rallies around the concerns of Asian Americans. Their identities are open, in-between, and always in transition, enabling them to form political alliances and solidarities, and to speak back to the regimes of representation.

Situated in the diaspora, Lee, Yew, and Lim can afford to inflect their works with issues of transgressive sexuality. *Among the White Moon Faces* has been considered "risqué" in its depiction of the daughter-father relationship, and Lim herself conjectures that as an academic woman her "discussion of emergent sexuality may be considered not so safe" (qtd. in Singh 139). After reading the London reviews of *Porcelain,* Yew's mother asked him "to consider writing a less inflammatory and provocative play" (Drukman 3). Indeed, Richard Farr, writing for *The Seattle Times,* warns: "This isn't for all tastes. Potential viewers should be warned that, despite its moments of humor, *Porcelain* is a harrowing story, with extremely strong language, sexual explicitness and violence" (2). For Lee's *The Wedding Banquet,* Megan Rosenfeld, a *Washington Post* staff writer, cautions that the film "includes some profanity and mild love scenes between two men" (2). I see the breaking of taboos in writing about sexuality, violence, and an authoritative woman's voice as a way of reimagining the field of Asian American cultural production.

Chapter One, "Father Knows Best: Reading Sexuality in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Porcelain*," begins with an exploration of the relationship among heteronormativity, filial piety, patrilineal transmission, same-sex sexuality, and patriarchy. It sets up the two texts by going through the notions of Chineseness and the rubric of Confucian filial piety informing the sexual identities of diasporic subjects. The film enacts a nostalgic affection for a world of Father knows best, an idealistic cinematic vision of Confucian patriarchy. Invoking the Sedgewickian trope of the closet and extending it to the diaspora in *The Wedding Banquet*, I argue that queerness and a continuing patrilineality are secured through the body of a Third World woman, whose body exists for reproduction, in an era of transnational capitalism. In the theatricality of everyday relations and closeting of sexuality, it becomes clear that deception is necessary to protect the integrity of heterosexual identity and to save face in the diaspora.

In this chapter, I am interested in the literary reconceptualizing of the law of the father, and the resurrection or contestation of paternal authority as well as the idealized image of heterosexuality and whiteness. By "law of the father," I intend a rather extended meaning, alluding to the law of patriarchy and a web of discourses that secure the regulatory regime of heterosexuality, and determine his subjects in cultural, social, and sexual terms. In *Porcelain*, the father or father of the nation is a signified authority that attains its power through this emotive reference. The imperial body of Britain is, to borrow Butler's words, a "figure in crisis," relying on the Oriental attributes of John to effect both a disciplining and a dissociation (49). I discuss how John's crime, an act that surely complicates, if not explodes, the model minority myth, evokes the raced and sexual anxieties of a governmental authority fearful of a sexually transgressive British

Chinese contaminating the body politic. Anticipating the legislative change in Britain's age of consent, *Porcelain* is produced on the cusp of change, situating Asian American literary production as a tool for timely transnational, social, and political critique.

Chapter Two, "'Talking Back': Body, Feminism, and Identity in *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*," shifts the focus from the law of the father to consider the limits of autobiography, radical feminist re-visioning of self and whiteness, and feminist perspective and discrepancies between "here" (America) and "there" (Asia). Specifically, I present and examine the trajectory of the various issues of feminism, agency and resistance in the immediate domestic terrain of America as well as in the original homeland, investing redemptively in Peranakan culture in the process of identity transition. Although Lim mentions a female domestic worker in a spontaneous way, her silence on class and the privilege she enjoys at her brother's home fails to do justice to the complexities with which the identities of women of color in the Southeast Asian domestic labor circuit are understood. I also argue that Lim's deployment of Mikhail Bahktin's theory of the Rabelaisian grotesque becomes more than another text within the carnivalesque tradition. Rather, it almost poses a challenge to that narrative tradition.

In analyzing these three works, my aim is to engage in a sustained critical reading of the disciplinary production of gender, the regulation of sexuality, the heteronormative imperative, and the traversing and re-traversing of geopolitical borders on the multiple horizons that Asian American cultural studies holds open to our imaginings, here at the beginning of twenty-first century.

# Chapter One[4]

## Father Knows Best: Reading Sexuality in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and Chay Yew's *Porcelain*

> Everyone all pretending around me. All pretending. My son no commit crime. No commit murder. My son no homo. No homo! He cannot be—I—I have no son. Son is dead. Dead to me. Dead.
>
> Mr Lee, *Porcelain*

> Children push you to be more mature, but you're never prepared to be a role model and teach kids what to do and give them what they want. You always fear you're not good enough, so you just pretend. It's like directing a movie: You have some idea, but a lot of acting is going on in both roles. You want to be honest with your kids, but you cannot totally. It would be like the movie *Liar Liar* – chaos. But as a parent, you have to keep things in order.
>
> Ang Lee, "The Angle on Ang Lee"

These epigraphs sum up succinctly the crux of Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*[5] and Chay Yew's *Porcelain*,[6] which is pretending, a deception that attempts to save face

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[4] A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication. *Culture and Transnationalism: Film, Writing, Society.*

[5] The first part of my title is an illusion to the trilogy of Lee's self-styled "Father Knows Best" films, which comprise *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). Produced with a budget of US$750,000, *The Wedding Banquet* was shot on location in New York City in five weeks. In addition to my own reading of the film, I refer to the screenplay in *Eat Drink Man Woman; The Wedding Banquet: Two Films by Ang Lee.*

[6] *Porcelain* is part of Yew's Whitelands trilogy that includes *A Language of Their Own* and *Half Lives* (Drukman 1 – 2). After revising *Half Lives,* Yew entitled it *Wonderland* (Román 364 n15). According to Yew, *Porcelain* is his "angry" play, and because it is "so risqué—very violent and about anonymous sex in the toilets—no college students wanted to audition" (3). At the outset of his writing career, some Asian American artists inveighed against Yew's gay themes and a theater board member resigned in protest. During auditions in 1995 for *A Language of Their Own,* for instance, Yew had to post warning signs to let Asian actors know in advance that it contained gay themes. As well,

and preserve traditional Chinese culture in the diaspora. In "Coming Out into the Global System," Mark Chiang states that the closet "signifies the deviation from ethnic identity that must be covered up" in *The Wedding Banquet* (379). For Chiang, it is clear that "all of the younger generation of Chinese/Taiwanese in the United States are engaged in the masquerade of authenticity insofar as none of them are capable of enacting the forms of tradition that the older generation continually seeks to re-create" (379). Drawing upon Chiang's idea that the closet is "a function of ethnicity as well as sexuality," I want to explore further the trope of the closet, a masquerade of normative gender and sexual identity by the younger generation of the Chinese diaspora in America and Britain, who are unable to maintain the traditional, axiomatic heterosexual configurations (379). The closet, I suggest, also applies to the older generation in the Chinese diaspora who are invested in patriarchal imperatives and "Chineseness." I choose two works, a film and a play, not because they individually or together exhaust the field of questions regarding race, gender, class, labor, and sexuality, but because they will allow me to throw into relief the concept of performance, an enactment of sexual identity in the body, which permeates the narratives and involves all the main characters who act out already-scripted subject positions. Throughout my discussion, I will deploy the concept of the closet to inform an analysis of the film and play and the ways in which they articulate same-sex sexuality and affirm patriarchy in relation to questions of power, identity, and Chineseness.

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the gay theme in *The Wedding Banquet*, Lee says, "scared off Chinese investors" (Bruni 1). Lee wrote the Chinese script for *The Wedding Banquet*, which took six years before it was translated into film. Taken together, such denunciation and protest demonstrate that gay themes are an affront to Asia Americans' taboo of non-normative sexuality.

My reading of Yew's *Porcelain* and Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* focuses principally on the way both stage an interracial relationship and show that the father figure occupies a role that calls for an ongoing reinterpretation of patriarchy in light of geopolitical realities. Openness is not a feature of Chinese culture in these two works, and the closet works as a strategy to maintain "face" in the diaspora. *Porcelain* was first staged at the Etcetera Theater Club in London on May 12, 1992, and *The Wedding Banquet* was first shown at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1993 and released in the United States in the same year. In these two works, I focus on the lies, silences, and denials that dominate the patriarchal family. In particular, I adopt Eve Sedgwick's theorization of the closet, extending the deployment of the closet to the diaspora to inform an analysis of the disciplinary mechanisms that function to produce and preserve intact the heteronormative definitions of a sense of "Chineseness" in the diaspora.[7] As Chiang has rightly put it, homosexuality is not only a forbidden subject in most Asian communities, it is also something that does not warrant any discussion "because it is only a *problem* for white people: 'it' is a white *disease*," and in Hong Kong, for instance, the "colloquial word for a gay man is simply *gay-loh* (gay fellow)" (378). The first section of this chapter takes up the preservation of an idealistic, masculine Chinese identity and the issues of patrilineality by attending to the film's use of gender differentiation and the

---

[7] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have usefully defined heteronormativity as follows: "Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction. A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity" (554).

concept of closetedness. In the second section, I argue that the closet in Yew's play gestures to the tension between public sex and containment. To begin this analysis, I turn to the question of Confucian thinking and the idea of Chineseness.

## Confucian Values, Filial Piety, Chineseness, and *The Wedding Banquet*

The Confucian political philosophy is foregrounded in patriarchy, a structure that is based on stratified relations. In the Confucian hierarchical system, status is defined clearly and conduct is guided by propriety, which requires submission to and acceptance of authority. This leads to asymmetrical communication and interaction between father and son, husband and wife, superior and subordinate, teacher and pupil, and so on. In *An Introduction to Confucianism*, Xizhong Yao contends that Chinese scholars conceive of Confucianism as containing elements that contributed to Chinese and East Asian modernity, despite their acknowledgement of the tension between Confucianism and social reality (266).[8] In the pantheon of Confucian ethics, the most important values are unquestioning allegiance and obedience of subjects to authority. It is not my intention to delve in detail into Confucianism and neo-Confucianism; rather, I focus on the salient elements of Confucian ethos such as acceptance of authority, filial piety, and familial

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[8] According to Yao, Chinese intellectuals equate modernization with westernization, and believe that the Confucian ideology might not help in the process of modernization (267). For a positive take on Confucianism, see Yao, 245 – 286. In the past decade, the economic success of East Asia in the global system of late capitalism is often attributed to the affirmation of Confucianism, and economic élites have called themselves ""Confucian capitalists"" (Nonini and Ong 16). However, the meltdown of Asian economies in late 1997 has led to a reassessment of Confucian values, which are now held responsible for the economic breakdown. For insights into Confucian and Asian values with specific reference to Singapore, see Chua Beng-Huat, ""Asian-Values' Discourse and the Resurrection of the Social."

orientation for the purpose of highlighting the investment of the closet in the diaspora, a closet of secrecy that stabilizes the gender and sexual identity of the characters who violate Confucian taboos such as same-sex romance or erotic practices and interracial romance.[9]

The concept of filial piety is complex, comprising a range of virtues such as moral obligation, respect toward the elders of the family, and fraternal deference. Basically, filial piety can be defined as "a natural feeling of responsibility and as an expression of gratitude which makes good the pains the parents took for their child" (Roetz 54). As Roetz has put it, "the survival of Chinese culture has been attributed to the influence of *xiao*, filial piety" (53).[10] If *xiao* represents the basic power in which to perpetuate the Chinese nation, then *The Wedding Banquet* ceaselessly reinstalls the concept of filial piety for this purpose: care and obedience toward the parents, "primary to the father" (Roetz 54). The film takes pains to reiterate the son's care for his father,

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[9] Nonini and Ang have productively defined the concept of diaspora as follows: "[A] pattern that marks a common condition of communities, persons, and groups separated by space, an arrangement, moreover, that these persons see themselves as sharing ("we Chinese . . . "). This pattern is continually reconstituted throughout the regions of dispersion, and it is characterized by multiplex and varied connections of family ties, kinship, commerce, sentiments and values about native place in China, shared memberships in transnational organizations, and so on" (18). It is in this spirit that I suggest the closet is of utmost importance to the Chinese family in performing the codes of Chineseness and maintaining communal ties and survival within the diaspora.

[10] The state or the ruling power can deploy the concept of filial piety to include loyalty to the ruling government. See Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, "Between the Family and the State," in *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995): 140 – 158. This chapter provides a basis for understanding the valorization of Confucian family values (later reframed as Asian values) and yoking them to the economic success of the state.

for example, by showing Wai Tung sobbing quietly in bed and begging Wei Wei not to let the father know that she is not having a baby. Although Yao agrees that Confucianism holds women in low esteem, and requires them to show filial piety toward their parents and parents-in-law, and to assist their husbands and educate their children, he insists that it should not be held responsible for discrimination against women in East Asia, arguing that sexism is characteristic of almost all traditional patriarchal societies (183). Clearly, the film portrays the mother as a submissive wife to the father, and Wai Tung as an obedient son who respects his parents, especially his father, as central to a sense of Chineseness in the diaspora.

In order to locate and analyze the trope that constitutes Chinese identities in the diaspora and the social and cultural contexts of transnational Chinese practices, however maligned and vexed the term has become, I invoke an imagined category like "Chineseness." I do so even while acknowledging such an identifier works to perpetuate an essentialist identity, an identity that elides the materiality of class, gender, sexuality, place of birth, language, and religion, which Chinese people must negotiate historically and geographically.[11] For *The Wedding Banquet,* the exigency of preserving the ancestral

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[11] Critics have discussed what Rey Chow calls the "habitual obsession with 'Chineseness,'" "a kind of cultural essentialism" in which "what begins as resistance to the discriminatory practices of the older Western hegemony becomes ethnicist aggression" ("Introduction" 5). In "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm," len Ang warns that "we must not only resist the convenient and comforting reduction of Chineseness as a seemingly natural and certain racial essence," we also need to question the usage of Chineseness as an identification marker (297). As well, in her self-reflexive article, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora," Ang posits that Chineseness is a label that is "constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China" (5). Discussing the case of John Huang, the Chinese American fund-raiser for the Democratic National Committee who is charged with corruption for raising funds from

bloodline makes apparent the father's determination to fulfill his filial obligation, and to stabilize socio-cultural affiliation and political solidarity in the diaspora. For a transnational entrepreneur élite such as Wai Tung, family and guanxi (particularist relations) provide him with "access to inside information and commercial contacts" in the diaspora (Nonini and Ong 21). It is no surprise that the mother is disappointed and upset with her son's casual treatment of the marriage ritual:

> Mrs Gao: "This is a milestone in a person's life. You only get married once. You should consider how the bride feels, if not yourself. We collected thirty thousand yuan in gift money in Taiwan. We brought it all here to give you a grand banquet. How can we go back to face our friends and relatives?"
>
> Wai Tung: "I am not getting married to your friends and relatives."
>
> Mrs Gao: "If not for friends and relatives then why bother to get married?" (Schamus 155)

Thus Chineseness here is based on filial piety, family values, communal ties, and guanxi relations that are crucial to Wai Tung's economic success in the diaspora. His investment in the closet becomes a necessity; it is literarily the father's, mother's, Wai Tung's, Simon's, and Wei Wei's business. While the generation and valorization of bloodline kinship by Chinese immigrants point to a political taxonomy of exclusion, it might be understood as a resistance to the dominant culture that refuses to accept them.

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foreign sources, Arif Dirlik suggests that the reification of Chineseness has led to fostering a "new racism," because the affirmation of Chineseness "can be sustained only by recourse to a common origin, or descent, that persists in spite of widely different historical trajectories" (44).

What is at issue, then, is that the rationale for bloodline purity operates as a way, though fraught with difficulties and contradictions, to arrive at some kind of common historical cultural identity to counter racial oppression and cultural hegemony. In the context of *The Wedding Banquet,* filial piety takes the form of Wai Tung closeting his sexual orientation and fulfilling his father's wish. To be sure, Wai Tung manages to perform heteronomative masculinity, to effect biological reproduction, and to maintain his romantic union with Simon, which is no mean feat for a gay man in the diaspora.

Chinese American Masculinity

In "Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity," King-Kok Cheung argues that "Asian American men in general, who are seldom allowed by the dominant culture to *perform* 'masculine' roles, are self-driven to rehearse gender norms" (173). Contrasting the characters of Wai Tung and Simon in this sense, Lee sets up a series of dichotomies, or what Eve Sedgwick calls "epistemologically charged pairings"—masculine/feminine and husband/wife—in which Wai Tung represents everything masculine.[12] In the opening scene of the film, for instance, Wai Tung, drenched in perspiration, is listening to his mother's naggings about marriage, family, and his filial responsibility while working out in the gym. No matter what his sexual identity is, the scene shows that he has to fulfill his filial duty of producing an heir, a task that is as straining as working on the exercise-machine. What is shown here, and

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[12] Sedgwick elaborates on this idea of "the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public" with "'the closet'" and "'coming out'" in *Epistemology of the Closet* (72).

recapitulated in the narrative, is that Wai Tung's character offers an attractive model of masculinity—he is smart, manly, sensitive, educated, upwardly mobile, and good-looking. In his insightful essay on *The Wedding Banquet,* David L. Eng points out the new, non-stereotypical way in which Lee portrays a gay Asian American man who moves "toward an incipient queer and diasporic formation," but argues that this potentially groundbreaking representation remains "ultimately unfulfilled" (44). Following Eng, I would argue that the narrative underwriting of Wai Tung's sexual identity is one of need, the need to be closeted in order to produce an authentic ethnic identity that evacuates homosexuality. While the film enables the reimaginings of Asian American men, particularly in the character of Wai Tung, the reimaginings rest on heteronormative ideologies marked by gender hierarchy, in which women as well as Simon are subjected to the authority of father and husband.[13] Within this organizing of the filmic narrative, the performance and construction of the ethnic closet function to reinscribe oxymoronic paternal authoritarianism and to maintain order in conformity with heteropatriarchal culture. At this point, I am reminded of the observation made by James Clifford in his comments about people struggling to situate themselves and to organize sites of collective support in the late twentieth century: "This hooking-up and unhooking,

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[13] This paper is occasioned in part by my sense of dismay at the way women are portrayed in the film as subservient to Mr Gao, the patriarch, or rather the Sun-Ra, from whom all power flows. In particular, Wei Wei succumbs to the traditional and idealized reproductive feminine maternal role and carries a child for a man who is unable to love her. Above all, she conforms to what Rey Chow calls "the traditional morality that demands Chinese women to be chaste, self-sacrificing, and thus virtuous" (*Writing Diaspora* 112).

remembering and forgetting, gathering and excluding of cultural elements – processes crucial to the maintenance of an 'identity' – must be seen as both materially constrained and inventive" (97).[14] What makes Clifford's ideas particularly relevant to my overall discussion is the positioning and investment of the diasporic subject in traditions. This has a patrilineal and masculinist implication in *The Wedding Banquet*, so that it is necessary for the film to evoke the rigor by which the culture of a heterosexual family, and by extension an affirmation of Chinese identity, must be preserved.

Cheung writes of the prerequisites of Chinese masculinity that are "tied to the reproductive role" (183). Since culturally and, particularly, patrilineally only sons can pass on the family line, the film endows Wai Tung with all the attributes of phallic power, as he is the only son of the Gao family and so the essential source for continuing both family and, metaphorically, the Chinese race. Without sons, the lineage is doomed, and by extension, the survival of the Chinese culture and identity. At stake is the need to sustain the Chinese race, and Wai Tung appears to have succeeded in his performance of heterosexual identity, a passing that is essential for keeping up appearances in the diasporic community.

Assuming the role of Simon's bourgeois husband and later as a heterosexual groom in the wedding banquet, Wai Tung is at once man and father. Wai Tung can have the cake and eat it, that is, enjoy an intimate relationship with Simon and, simultaneously, perform a sanctioned identity by seeming to have a heteronormative reproductive family. So, in the end, the full spectacular exercise of the wedding banquet

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[14] Clifford asserts that people selectively mobilize pasts and perform traditions as "ways of belonging to some discrete social time and place in an interconnected world" (97).

is invoked as public performance for the diasporic community, maintaining the movie's heterosexual resolution. However, I think it is important to take note that the narrative—though comedic and innovative—works to re-establish a modified patriarchal law and to reinstate conservative notions of gender boundaries, even as it reframes Wai Tung's identity outside of the heterosexual paradigm. The film's interest in reinstalling patriarchy is further sustained by women's investment in this system, as expressed in the mother's enforcing differences and complicity in extracting the procreative and the surplus labor of working-class Third World women.

Gender Politics

As part of the "Father Knows Best" trilogy, the film also underwrites the notion that mother knows least by depicting the mother as intellectually and linguistically inferior to the father. When Wai Tung reveals his sexuality to the mother, she makes a series of conjectures, making him exasperated. In complete disavowal of Wai Tung's sexual identity, the mother's immediate response to Wai Tung's coming out of the closet is to blame Simon: "Did Simon lead you astray? How can you be so confused?" Thinking that Wai Tung's sexual transgression will kill his father, she tells her son to closet his sexual identity, which only indicates her naïveté and incompetence compared to the father. The mother's discomfort with and disapproval of homosexuality as well as Simon are evident in the way she quizzes Simon about his fractured family, who she considers "tragic," with Wei Wei as the interpreter. She is curious about the sexual identity of Simon's sisters, but can only euphemize her question in a derogatory way: "Are they weird?" The mother's seeming volubility and ignorance legitimate the father's

upbraiding at the breakfast table, a reprimand that is required to silence her inability to see Simon as the figure of domestic salvation. In fact, the film genders the trait of talkativeness as feminine, and has the father silence and so contain the feminine:

> Mrs Gao: "Are we overstaying our welcome?"
>
> Mr Gao: "Shut up and eat."
>
> Mrs Gao: "Did Wai-Tung forget to pay his rent?"
>
> Mr Gao: "You can't put your foot in your mouth if you keep it closed." (Schamus 191)

In this scene, the father deflates the mother with condescending sexism, a silencing and humiliating rebuke that she endures.

The film also recapitulates the conflation of women and consumerism, a conflation whose popular circulation evacuates the situations and struggles of exploited Third World female labor under transnational capitalism in Asia and America, where women are disciplined and culturally regulated by state-instituted patriarchal systems.[15] The film shows the mother as a savvy shopaholic, whose pricey purchases are from the largest textile firm in Taiwan, the best wholesale jeweler in Taipei, Japan, and Malaysia. It is no surprise that the father makes this remark: "Shopping is a woman's game. It requires unlimited stamina. I can't keep up with them" (Schamus 185). Indeed, the mother seems to put tremendous emphasis on shopping: "It's a big headache each time I come to America. Wei Wei went shopping with me for how long? And I still couldn't

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[15] For a detailed discussion of sweatshops and industrialization in Asia, California, and Central America, see Aihwa Ong, "The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity," 61 – 97.

get enough things. I couldn't afford anything on Fifth Ave. And we finally found something good and reasonable—it's made in Taiwan" (Schamus 186). As a consumer in transnational capitalism who buys commodities that are manufactured in Third World countries and sold in overpriced, chic Manhattan department stores, the mother is implicated in the subordination of women in developing countries.

The mother's affection for Wei Wei is grounded in a form of economic barter system: when Wei Wei returns all the gifts the mother has given her for the wedding, the mother resorts to manipulating Wei Wei's sympathy:

> Mother: "This, you can return to us. But how about the love we gave to you?"
>
> Wei Wei: "I can only ask for your forgiveness. But my love for you was real."
>
> Mother: "I don't want you to return them."
>
> Wei Wei: "I don't want them back. I can't take them."
>
> Mother: "I want you to! I want my grandchild!"

In this, the mother's love takes the form of verbal seduction and copious tears, preying on Wei Wei's feelings. Wei Wei's eventual freedom from her Third World status through her pregnancy indicates that her corporeality and sexuality are bartered for her security, cultural belonging, and legal status in America.

According to the filmic narrative, Wei Wei, the feisty, bohemian artist, undergoes a transformation in which she becomes a domesticated housewife and a nurturing mother. From this perspective, the film conveys an imagined patriarchy and a conservative notion of womanhood, which inform a femininity associated with

motherhood and submission. Wei Wei represents an aberrational character, a woman who is not "wife material" for Wai Tung. Central to the narrative is the construction of Wei Wei as a liberated, sexually available woman, whose subjectivity must be delimited and disciplined to maintain the stability and order of social relations in the diaspora. Titillating in its play with Wei Wei's open sexuality, the film is adamant in enacting the change in her behavior by regulating her desire and displacing it from the sexual register to the maternal. When the film first shows Wei Wei in her sweltering loft, her seductiveness, her perspiration-soaked clothing, and her come-on directed at Wai Tung are at once out of place in received Confucian notions of identity and morality, and exceed the boundaries of femininity. Her aberrational splitting from traditional femininity legitimatizes the discipline that is needed to subdue her. Taking swigs of vodka from the bottle, engaging in disappointing erotic encounters with all kinds of men in an attempt to secure a green card, and declaring to Wai Tung that she fancies him—"It's my fate. I always fall for handsome gay men"– Wei Wei spells trouble, notwithstanding her physical beauty as a heterosexual object of desire. As Rey Chow contends, the Chinese élite, that is those who are well educated, still regard female sexuality "in accordance with the Confucian and neo-Confucian notions of female chastity" (*Writing Diaspora* 112). It is precisely the surplus signification Wei Wei embodies that must be contained and managed, according to the narrative logic of Confucian ideology, so that she becomes, or at least performs the role of, proper Chinese

woman, dutiful wife, and nurturing mother.[16]

While Sister Mao is thoroughly Westernized, Chiang argues, it is she who most effectively performs Chinese femininity, and does so in a way which Wei Wei seems remotely capable of in the beginning of the film. Chiang notes that Sister Mao, an upper-crust Taiwanese like Wai Tung, appears to be the "perfect match" for him (379). Certainly, in contrast with Lee's portrayal of the relatively privileged and sophisticated life that Sister Mao has led—replete with a PhD, knowledge of five languages, and training in Western opera—Wei Wei, a mainland Chinese woman, seems to evoke the image of a hypersexually available woman, rather than the traditional Chinese symbolic role of the "proper woman." Judith Butler's concept of gender performance proves instructive in this context: "Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. . . . Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relationships of discipline, regulation, punishment" (231, 232). My point is that Sister Mao recognizes the cultural reasons and importance of gender role conformity, and performs Asian femininity, including her rendering of *Madama Butterfly*, with panache, showing that femininity is an artifice for Asian women.

In fact, Wei Wei appears to have succeeded in presenting herself as attractive and sexually appealing on the wedding day—complete with make-up and resplendent bridal

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[16] For a discussion of migration of mainland Chinese women to Taiwan and Hong Kong, see Shu-mei Shih, "Gender and a Geopolitics of Desire: The Seduction of Mainland Women in Taiwan and Hong Kong Media."

gown, looking demure, and ladylike—so much so that the film cuts to a close-up shot of Wai Tung's captivated look. One upshot of this look is that the transformed Wei Wei becomes desirable enough for Wai Tung to consummate their marriage. In "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung argue that Wei Wei's "seduction of Wai-tung borders on sexual violence: Wai-tung's saying 'no' and the positionality of Wei-wei could qualify this as a 'rape' scene" (204 – 205). Indeed, Dariotis and Fung are right to note that Wei Wei's hypersexual aggression ironically "completes the process of her domestication" (204). To characterize this scene as a "rape" scene, however, precludes attention to the particularly procreative specificity of the conjugal union. The issue of Wai Tung's tumescent penis is problematic, but it makes clear that it is at once a matter of attaining fatherhood, and more importantly, of the urgency of patrilineal succession which is predicated on procreative sex. In fact, Wai Tung's capitulation to heterosexual consummation corroborates, in effect, his long-distance telephone conversation with his mother, exuberant after hearing the news of his impending wedding: "Of course you'll live to see your grandchild . . . I won't disappoint you." When Wei Wei decides to have the baby, even Wai Tung seems to be bursting with pride: "I'm gonna be a father!" I would want to assert that Wai Tung's half-hearted, feeble protest and tumescence need to be understood as a moment in which filial duty to the father is realized. To classify their physical union as rape only serves to deflect Wai Tung from his responsibility for the procreative activity. By legal definition, rape involves coercive sexual activity without consent, resulting in the victim suffering from some form of personal injury or trauma. Through the lens of filial piety, however, I see Wai Tung performing a ritualistic

marriage contract between Wei Wei and himself, rather than emerging from the activity a traumatized rape victim.

While Wai Tung's physical relationship with Wei Wei is merely instrumental, his relationship with Simon is one of affect, romantic love. The marriage between Wai Tung and Wei Wei represents a function of the closet, which is to conceal Wai Tung's sexual identity and to preserve the institution of the family in the diaspora. In a similar manner that harks back to the olden days of arranged marriages and acquiring mistresses, Wei Wei plays the role of Wai Tung's legally married wife and a mechanism for procreation, and Simon acts as Wai Tung's mistress or concubine. Indeed, Simon represents the apotheosis of the perfect partner, a romanticized ideal, for Wai Tung. The cinematic narrative depicts Simon as a character performing normative gender roles and guaranteeing harmony in the domestic space, a space that is stabilized around heterosexual norms. Occupying the place of a caring partner, Simon is required in the narrative structure in order to position Wai Tung in the masculine role and to closet his sexual identity. Working as a physical therapist, Simon complements Wai Tung, a busy, driven real-estate entrepreneur, with his domestic skills that include whipping up a candlelight dinner, and cooking Oriental gourmet dinner for the Gao family, a culinary expertise that the domestically challenged Wei Wei passes off as her own. Besides managing the affairs of the home, Simon even arranges the dubious wedding, thinking that it will give Wai Tung a big tax break, appease his parents' anxiety about their son's marital status, and provide Wei Wei with a green card. To put it simply, what appears to be a violation of heteronormativity—Simon's queerness—simply secures its power.

Indeed, in cultural terms, it is Simon rather than Wei Wei who represents the movie's locus of stability: he lets Wai Tung's parents and Wei Wei stay at his home; he takes pains to speak to the father and mother in halting Mandarin in an effort to communicate with them; he eases the tension between Wai Tung and his parents by taking them to a Chinese restaurant; he helps the father with physical therapy exercises regularly; he calls the airport to make arrangements for the father and mother's departure; and he does the household chores. Although Simon is "wife material" for Wai Tung and their interracial union is condoned by the father, Simon's sexual identity must remain closeted in order to enable Wai Tung's sexual identity to stay intact in the diaspora.

To mark Simon's sexual identity as concealed, the film includes two scenes of him in the bathroom.[17] The first scene involves Wai Tung talking on the phone with the mother, who tells him that she and his father are coming to America for his wedding. While this conversation is going on, the camera lingers on Simon in the bathroom, enclosed and circumscribed by the cubicle. The second scene occurs in a bathroom at the restaurant after the wedding banquet and before Simon drives the father and mother home. Simon faces the urinal, but the camera films his back, which covers him from view, and pans around the facilities after he walks away from the urinal. Crucial to these shots of Simon in the water closet, especially within the patriarchal imaginary the film

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[17] As well, the film shows moments in which both Wai Tung and the father are inside and emerging from the bathroom respectively, gesturing toward their closetedness. To conceal his relationship with Simon, Wai Tung skulks in the bathroom and talks to Simon with his cellular phone. To show the father's secret knowledge of his son's sexual identity, the father comes out of the bathroom just as Wai Tung sleepily opens the door, slightly shocked by the sight of his father.

articulates, is their function of keeping Simon's sexual identity in the closet, even though he is out in his community. The washroom, then, is symbolic: these scenes make visual the closeting of Simon's relationship with Wai Tung, who fails to live up to the traditional Chinese expectation of marrying a nice Chinese girl.

In return for his staying in the closet for the sake of maintaining Wai Tung's ethnic and sexual identity within the Asian diasporic community, Simon is readily accepted by the father as another son. This is demonstrated when the father gives him a red packet containing money on his birthday, a gift signifying Simon's contractual agreement with and complicity in the father's secret. [18] Although the film contains this contractual exchange by displacing Simon's acceptance with the aura of romance, it implies that his taking care of Wai Tung, that is his conjugal servitude, is a condition of the contractual familial agreement. Once these familial and patrilineal matters are put in order, the father's wishes are fulfilled.

Before I discuss the role of the father in the diaspora, I want to address Dariotis and Fung's interpretation of the father's raised arms when he is frisked by an airport security attendant "as a gesture of surrender, of one generation's sacrifice for another": "Yet, ultimately, it is the Gao family, and thus in a sense himself, which the general wishes to perpetuate" (202).[19] What escapes this argument is the logic of the father's

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[18] Simon must keep secret the father's awareness of Wai Tung's deception. As Mr Gao says in Chinese, "If I didn't let everyone lie to me, I'd never have gotten my grandchild!"

[19] Toward the penultimate paragraph of their discussion of *The Wedding Banquet*, Dariotis and Fung pose these questions with regard to the subject of homosexuality: "What of the sign of 'surrender' when the father raises his hands in the final moment of the film? Is it one of acceptance or one of emasculation?" (206).

knowledge of the staged wedding, his approval of Simon, his understanding of homosocial bonds, and his assurance of getting an heir. As such, I do not read the lifting of his arms as an indication of surrender; rather, I read it as a victory, as a moment of "father knows best." In an economy of patriarchal succession, the father himself escapes from an arranged marriage to join the army, but ultimately fulfills his filial duty of producing an heir. Now that patrilineal duty is passed to Wai Tung in the diaspora, the father can fly home, knowing that his lineage is secured and the loving care between his son and Simon is restored. Crucial to the film, especially within the diasporic imaginary to which it speaks, is the underscoring of paternal authority as wisdom and intelligence, attributes that the mother seems to lack. Clearly, there are moments in the final family tableaux scene that demonstrate Mrs Gao's refusal to accept Simon as part of the family, moments that differentiate her from the father: just as the family is looking at the wedding photographs, the mother turns perplexed when she sees a picture depicting Simon with his arms around Wai Tung; and she freezes up when Simon wants to give her a hug at the airport walkway. In this, the film is uncritically invoking gendering broad-mindedness as male and emotion as female. Knowing that Simon will be a caring companion for his son, the father, in contrast to the mother's petty behavior, grasps hold of Simon's hands before boarding the departing flight in the closing scene, a gesture that eloquently speaks of the patriarch's approval of interracial and same-sex union. Such a gesture, however, is not accorded to Wei Wei, signifying that the father favors Simon and treats her simply as a procreative mechanism as he did upon his arrival when he appraises Wei Wei's pelvic region, a marker of her breeding ability and remarks: "She'll have lots of babies." As long as the burden of patrilineation is resolved through Wei Wei, a Third

World woman, Mr Gao is willing to accommodate himself to Simon and Wai Tung's same-sex union.

The Omnipotent Patriarch

But what kind of man or father is Mr Gao, whose attributes might seem to be his ill health and delicious passivity? As a retired general, Mr Gao wields tremendous power in the family, despite his silence. It is certainly no accident that the father's status in the army is revealed to the audience through the mother: "He was a general commanding tens of thousands of soldiers." Louis Althusser asserts, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," that the Army constitutes one of the components of the Repressive State Apparatus, which "functions massively and predominantly by *repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology," in order to "ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the 'values' [the Army and the Police] propound externally" (74; original emphasis). Given this proposition, the film already positions the father in the forefront of the narrative, for his productive role and stature extend beyond commanding an army of soldiers to commanding his family. The army represents an overarching hegemonizing institution with a load of historical weight behind it, playing a crucial role in the formation of social order.

It is, of course, Lee, who mobilizes the narrative motif of the respectable paternal authority and disposes him to the veneration and submission of his family and Old Chen in the diaspora. So, Old Chen, the father's jeep driver for twenty years, is called on to formalize the heterosexual union in the film:

> Old Chen: "Young Master. I am not doing this for you. I am doing this for the Commander. The Commander has been to everyone else's banquets for decades. It's time to get back some of those hundred of gifts he gave. If you won't let him have this then you are ungrateful to your parents."
>
> Wai Tung: "Wouldn't it be too much trouble?"
>
> Old Chen: "Then it's decided. Commander, just leave everything to me. It'll be a great banquet. You will not lose face in America." (Schamus 163)

Assuming the role of the father's "servant" in the diaspora, Old Chen demonstrates deference to the retired commander (he bows to the father and insists on standing before him) and reminds Wai Tung of his filial obligation.[20] More importantly, he facilitates the rigor by which the sexual closet must be preserved when he mobilizes the wedding banquet ritual so that the father will not lose face in the diaspora.

Striking in the narrative is the fidelity and fraternal sentiments between the father and Old Chen, even as their relationship is anchored in the hierarchical order of patriarchal society. I would argue that the father's concern for genealogical transmission and his acceptance of his son's transgressive sexuality might be brought out by drawing together the homosocial and fraternal elements in the film. A remark made by Michel

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[20] Mr Gao's rank is significant because it evokes the father and president of Taiwan (1950 – 1975), Chiang Kai-shek, who was a Chinese general and Kuomintang statesman prior to his retreat from China after the Second World War. I thank Maria Ng for bringing this to my attention.

Foucault about the army and soldiers in prison camps during World War I, in his interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life," is telling in this regard:

> One can wonder how, in these absurd and grotesque wars and infernal massacres, the men managed to hold on in spite of everything. Through some emotional fabric no doubt. I don't mean that it was because they were each other's lovers that they continued to fight. But honor, courage, not losing face, sacrifice, leaving the trench with the captain—all that implied a very intense emotional tie. It's not to say: "Ah, there you have homosexuality!" (311)

Thus, the father's endorsement of the same-sex romance between his son and Simon is facilitated by his own homosociality—his ties to Old Chen. Old Chen, positioned subordinate, reminisces upon his service to the father during the war. The power difference between the father and Old Chen might be read as a turn-on in terms of homosocial relations, that is the social and military hierarchies are sites of erotic investment.[21] The father's homosocial bond to Old Chen is resolved by an appeal to the loyalty of a soldier to a commander, an allegiance that continues well after the war is over. Within the Confucian patriarchal social system, the father and his son are unable to make choices openly, so that both have to dissemble and closet their knowledge of the strength of homosocial and homosexual bonds.

In juxtaposition with Mrs Gao, Mr Gao is intelligent, discerning, sharp, bilingual,

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[21] Henning Bech's argument connecting "erotics" and "feelings of unity and being together" bears significance for the link between the father and Old Chen, which is "very much about presence," rather than "the physical-orgasmic act" (69).

geoculturally mobile, and open-minded in matters of sexuality. At the same time, Mr Gao's modernity is closeted from his family and his cognizance of Wai Tung's transgressive sexuality and the staged marriage is revealed only to Simon and the audience. Mr Gao's acceptance of Simon as Wai Tung's partner and a member of the family, then, constitutes what Eve Sedgwick terms "silent complicity" in his son's closeted sexual identity (80).[22] After all, "'[c]losetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it," as Sedgwick reminds us (3). This figuration of the father relies on embedded stereotypes of gender, and the film actually tells the story of a father whose modernity is informed by the non-modern, even as it is modified within the transnational matrix of race, class, and sexuality. [23]

To better understand the character of Mr Gao, Lee's investment in the father figure will merit elaboration. As Lee has been keen to point out, *The Wedding Banquet*

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[22] Wai Tung's coming out to his mother creates the conditions of the closet, that is, the mother's secrecy and the father's silence closet their knowledge of their son's sexual identity, which serves to secure their Chineseness in the diaspora.

[23] I am aware of the multidimensional meanings and uses of "modernity." Nevertheless, I find the term useful in that it evokes a particular way of thinking grounded on changing forms of knowledge, cultural pluralism, formation of new identities, and social interactions. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Gregor McLennan write: "The growing social pluralism and cultural complexity of modern societies, the global impact of the electronic media of communication spreading the images of and messages of 'modernity' worldwide, the permeation of daily life by the mediation of symbolic forms, the aesthetic revolution in the design of physical environments as well as in contemporary art forms—these have accelerated the pace of cultural innovation, the production of new languages, and the pursuit of novelty and experiment as cultural values" (8).

belongs to the "Father Knows Best" trilogy, a collection of cultural products that seek to examine the "repressed, patriarchal society" that he came from: "Women make decisions for me . . . . My male leads, in all my movies, they're the guys who cannot make decisions. They have to make decisions based on what women tell them. In my later films, the father figures are even more clueless" (Hepola 2). My point in mentioning Lee's preoccupation with the father figure is to suggest that, precisely because Asian women are able to survive within oppressive traditional culture, he is anxious to reinscribe the power of the father.[24] For me, the father's cultural mobility, liberal thinking and tacit approval of his son and Simon's sexual relationship gesture not to his cluelessness, but rather to the values and constraints that are placed on individuals and their sexuality, values and constraints that are linked to tradition and modernity, that link Chinese within the diaspora and diasporic Chinese to their homeland. Mr Gao's performance of unknowing when it comes to his son's sexuality makes explicit that his family's status in the diaspora is based on wealth, privilege, and established sexual mores as a technology of power. Beneath the quiet facade, the father is always already exerting an unspoken control over his family, and it is in his pregnant silences that he

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[24] Sheng-mei Ma writes that Lee took his parents and parents-in-law along on his honeymoon, and found that his elderly father "'slept all the way through'" his honeymoon trip: "It dawns on him then that the immutable and permanent family, one symbolized by his father, is in fact transient" (148). Significantly, Ma mentions that Lee sees the parallel between his frail father, the central figure in the family, and the collapsing of Chinese culture: "Family ethics revolving around a patriarchal figure is, after all, the foundation of Confucian cosmology" (149). Lee admits that he used to make movies based on what he thought was "good," but after *The Wedding Banquet,* he remarks, "movies should not be about my statements, so my attitude toward audience and filmmaking has changed somewhat" (Ruby 1).

paradoxically manages to demand the reproduction of codes of Chineseness: obedience, filial duty, and responsibility. In this narrative, there are talkative women and silent men. The mother might be doing all the cajoling and talking, she might also be doing all the ostensible decision-making; however, at any time when the father decides to speak his word is law. It is the interstices between the close-up shots of his facial gestures and somber silence that instill in those before him a fear of his censure.

Gina Marchetti has cogently remarked that *The Wedding Banquet* is a movie about "defining the closet, constructing the closet, legitimizing the closet, coming out of the closet, staying in the closet, and exposing the closet" (282 – 283).[25] However, it is not coming out of the closet that interests me in the narrative, but rather the transnational interests of race and class and the cultural meanings homosexuality expresses, as these concerns necessitate the performance of normative sexual identity for the legitimatization of the family as institution, and the protection and production of racial health and fitness in America. In this case, the logic of exploitation has the power of the father depending upon the deprivation of Wei Wei, making it useful to inquire into the embeddedness of race, class, gender, and sexual fantasies in the filmic narrative that mask its complicity with modes of exploiting and oppressing women. Despite the film's progress toward resolution and order that is requisite for a comedy, what it actually dwells on is the effectiveness of the modern patriarch to reproduce filial citizenry and to silence

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[25] Marchetti also argues that the telephone and photographs function to "construct and deconstruct the closet" (283).

queerness in the diaspora. *The Wedding Banquet*, I suggest, legitimizes the closet in order to secure patrilineal transmission and to sustain the normative constructions of masculinity and femininity, which underlie relationships of power, race, and sexuality. Lee's film is not merely about boy-likes-boy, boy-loses-boy, boy-regains-boy; rather, it installs a question of undetectability and concealability in its protagonist's sexual identity. As the film insists, Wai Tung, charged with the onus of reproducing the next generation, is distinguished from Simon in terms of gender construction. While Wai Tung can pass as a straight man, making his queerness invisible, Simon's character reads like a "woman" within the heteronormative dyad Wai Tung enables.

On its face, *The Wedding Banquet* appears to be a narrative about familial relations, but it is a carefully constructed work. It is unmistakable that the father, an expert on closets, is both queer and heteronormative, and his silence represents a tenacious discipline and maintenance of heterosexuality in the Foucauldian sense. Amidst the diasporic reality of challenging cultural and social changes, the film keeps the ideal of paternal, masculine power well alive: it is the father figure of Mr Gao—"I watch, I hear, I learn"—and his looks of disapproval that Wai Tung, Wei Wei, Mrs Gao, and Simon reverently fear and attempt to please, demonstrating that the father continues to wield tremendous authority. The closet, then, satisfies the father's excess privilege and desire to perpetuate both family lineage and ethnic identity in the diaspora through the exploitation of Third World reproductive labor.

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[26] In a telephone interview with Frank Bruni, Lee has been only too keen to point out that the film "is more a family drama than a gay movie. It's about relationships and ambiguities" (1).

*Porcelain*

Chay Yew's *Porcelain* focuses on the father's power and role in the relationship of his Asian son with a white man. Yew dramatizes the immigrant father, ashamed and devastated by his son's sexuality and crime of murder, disowning him, and offers us the figure of Dr Jack Worthing, cloaked in the drag of heteronormative moral authority, begging the question of his sexuality. Drawing upon the concept of the closet, I suggest that the play tellingly elaborates same-sex sexuality in relation to questions of ethnic identity, pathology, social control, and power. Considering Chinese cultural aversion to publicity and resistance to same-sex relations, the father's need to enforce the closet within the diaspora is even more urgent in the play *Porcelain* than in Lee's film. John's male-centered sexual practices constitute a transgression of the traditional definitions of Chinese community and its established perimeters concerning sexuality.

While the closet in *The Wedding Banquet* works to conceal queerness, the closet in *Porcelain* points to the tension between public sex and containment. *Porcelain* is not quite as glossy as, and more intense than, *The Wedding Banquet.* The language used in the play to describe the detail of erotic exchange is abrasive, but it brings to bear the realities of a lived experience. The trajectory of the play follows John Lee, a nineteen-year-old British Chinese[27] boy waiting to attend Cambridge University, who cruises the public restroom scene looking for love. John's lover, William Hope, is a twenty-six-year-old builder who identifies himself as a heterosexual man but participates in same-sex

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[27] I mobilize the inscription proposed by David Parker in which the Chinese people in Britain are identified (211). In Britain, "'Asian'" is a signifier for South Asian (people who originally come from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), a term that excludes Chinese and other East Asians (214).

erotic intimacy in public restrooms. Feeling that his heterosexual male identity is threatened by John's sexuality, William ditches John and returns to meeting anonymous strangers at the public restroom in Bethnal Green in East London for quick trysts. For William, returning to this practice serves as a way of disavowing a relationship with John and also his own queerness. The jilted John shoots William six times, turning the white porcelain urinal in the restroom red. Immediately after this murder, the media conduct interviews with various individuals, transmogrifying the murder into a sensational documentary of an Oriental killing a British man. Then enters Dr Jack Worthing, "one of the least liked criminal psychologists in the business," who interrogates John and decides that the young man be given life without parole (*Porcelain* 17).

As a theatrical retelling of *Madame*[28] *Butterfly* and *Carmen,* with the Asian man sitting in his jail cell and saying, "I've finally got Will all to myself now," *Porcelain* unsettles the audience's presumptions of codes of behavior for Asians (110).[29] Giacomo Puccini's libretto presents a recognizable representation of the demure, faithful, and silent ideal Asian woman, a Butterfly who plays out all the erotic, exotic, and imperialist fantasies of Western men. Chinese pop music, Puccini's libretto, and

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[28] I follow Yew's spelling of "*Madame*" (*Porcelain* 72, 78).

[29] The docile and modest Madame Butterfly motif, an image of the Japanese geisha, has become prevalent in the representation of Asian women in Western popular culture since the beginning of the twentieth century. Puccini's opera opened at La Scala in 1904 and in the United States at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1907. The narrative of "Madame Butterfly" (1898) was introduced in the United States by John Luther Long, who based his novella on Pierre Loti's French version of his popular novel, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). *Madama Butterfly* is derived from a one-act play by David Belasco produced in the U. S. in 1900 and published in 1917. See David Mesher, "Metamorphosis of a Butterfly," *San Jose Studies* 17.3 (1991): 4 – 21. Yew also draws on the final death scene of Bizet's *Carmen* to bring the play to a climax.

*chinoiserie* are popular Oriental signifiers of colonial fantasy, and Puccini's opera is a popular piece of music for evoking an "erotic fantasy" for white men (Fung 124). William asserts from the outset that the music of *Madame Butterfly* is his favorite, revealing that his relationship with John is predicated precisely on a perspective aligned with the opera whose theatrical function it is to circulate the romantic sentiments embodied in the Japanese geisha, a model in which racial and sexual fantasies intersect. Contrary to the conventions of the Madame Butterfly legend, a trope that continues to circulate as an instrument for the oppression of Asian women and gay men, with a gruesome twist the play counters the stereotype of the submissive Oriental woman killing herself for a man after learning that he has married an American wife. Will's death, of course, has specific dramatic functions—it underscores John's refusal to play the role of the tragic Butterfly in cultural terms, and at the same time, critiques the West's intrigue with Oriental culture as "rooted in ignorance" (*Porcelain* 32). John repudiates this mixture of ignorance and curiosity, a fascination that is evident in Dr Worthing, who John views as like "everyone else":

> Like everyone else you sit comfortably on the other side of the wall. Perched. Watching us. Studying us. Looking at us. And you never once leave the other side to join us or understand us. You don't want to. We are mythicized by you. We are your interesting geisha girls, bespectacled accountants and dentists, your local Chinese takeaway. Your fascination. And why should you want to climb over and join us? Are you afraid of finding out that we're just the same as you? Have the same feelings and the same fears as you? How we are so much alike?

You and I? (*Porcelain* 33)

Rejecting the discursive representations and essentialist notions of Orientalist fantasy, John debunks stereotypical expectations twice over: first by not conforming to the image of the accepting victim, and second by not appending himself to the list of Madame Butterfly's necrology.[30] As the play depicts an Asian man committing a homicide, an act that goes against the dominant culture's racial stereotypes of the "model minority," it offers an ongoing process of rethinking the power politics of race and sex in interracial relationships in all their complexities. To demonstrate the connection between the model minority myth, history of discrimination and violence, and the disavowals of the contemporary needs and concerns of Asians living in the diaspora, I turn to the conception of Asian Americans as model minority and its distorted representation of the social reality of Asians in the diaspora.

Disidentification with the Model Minority Stereotype

Calling for a change in the current racial paradigm, in "Why We Need a Critical Asian American Legal Studies," Richard Chang proposes a study that includes interethnic and interracial relations, in order to bring to bear "the dominant culture's belief in the 'model minority' [that] allows it to justify ignoring the unique discrimination faced by Asian Americans" (370). According to Chang, the concept of "model minority" was formulated by William Petersen, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley,

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[30] In *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang inverts the Madame Butterfly ubiquitous paradigm so that the Asian (wo)man gets to live and the French man kills himself after realizing that he is being deceived by a Chinese spy.

who employed the term in a *New York Times Magazine* article in 1966. The term "model," writes Petersen, refers to "two senses": "first, as a way of praising the superior performance of Japanese Americans; and second, as a way of suggesting that other ethnic groups should *emulate* the Japanese American example" (qtd. in Chang 370). In "Perils of the Body and Mind," Gary Y. Okihiro provides a necessary critique of the model minority stereotype, a label that "positions Asia and America as antipodes, never meeting, as 'East is East and West is West'" (140). However, Okihiro argues, aspects of the model minority stereotype are interimplicated in elements of the yellow peril[31]: "We might see them as engendered images: the yellow peril denoting a masculine threat of military and sexual conquest, and the model minority symbolizing a feminized position of passivity and malleability" (142). Citing Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan as racial stereotypes of the yellow peril and model minority respectively, Okihiro maintains that they pose dangers of the body and mind, and threaten white supremacy. Both Okihiro and Chang quote an article in the December 26, 1966 issue of the *U. S. News & World Report*,[32] that notes Asian family values and responsibilities, hard work, self-help, and

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[31] According to Okihiro, the concept of yellow peril helps to "define that challenge posed by Asia to Europe's dominance and was inscribed within the colonialist discourse as a justification for the imposition of whites over nonwhites, of civilization/Christianity over barbarism/paganism . . . . And while serving to contain the Other, the idea of the yellow peril also helped to define the white identity, within both a nationalist and an internationalist frame" (137 – 138).

[32] Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song include "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." in *Asian American Studies: A Reader* as "a historical document" that is constructed from flawed information and analyses (158 – 163). To this I may add that the model minority myth constitutes one of the pressures of the diaspora, and many Asians embrace it, resulting in fissures in families whose children fail to live up to the myth. Speaking of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Yew says: "Wilde's play is very Asian in that respect [deception]: Since Asian Americans are the model

academic achievement, are elements of "the model minority" that are conceived in material terms—social advancement and upward mobility. I concur with Chang; colluding with the model minority and flaunting the success of Asian Americans "is offensive," for this myth not only renders the oppression of Asian Americans invisible, it also hurts other disenfranchised racial minorities and poor whites by comparing them to an Asian American ideal (Chang 373). Asian Americans embracing such a hypothesis only continue to feed a festering sense of anger and resentment among other racial minorities.

Viewed in this light, *Porcelain* is a necessary play, laying bare the messiness of appearance and reality, of identity politics and diasporic communities, which are threatened with implosion of racial, political, social, and sexual tensions. To the politically conservative Asian communities in the diaspora, John is bad boy karma and his flouting of the law, participating in illegal sexual conduct and killing Will, seem morbidly twisted. The shooting scene, for instance, represents a radical, shocking behavior, unexpected from one who seeks social approval from the Asian diasporic community and the state:

> Voice One: Hated him so much you murdered him in cold blood?
>
> John: Yes.
>
> Voice One: Hated him so much that you shot him six times.

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minority, we must certainly be the best liars, especially to ourselves. We've tried so hard not to rock the boat. Be American" (Drukman 3). As well, David Parker reminds us that success stories of British Chinese not only elicit "admiration," but also "repulsion" from the dominant "gaze" (80).

John: Yes.

Voice: Not one shot but six.

John: Yes. Six.

Voice One: Six shots. Two in the face. One in the throat. Two in the chest and one in the groin. (*Porcelain* 45)

This particular interrogation scene constitutes one of the many moments in the play where Yew disrupts the white supremacist fiction of the model minority, a prescribed notion that limits sexual expression. John's "*disruptive excess*," to borrow Luce Irigaray's term, threatens the hegemonic heterosexual system, a system that has already excluded him racially, culturally, and sexually (78; original emphasis). However, his excess also represents a resistance to the status quo of closeting his sexual identity and desire because he refuses to be oppressed by it. As the cultural identity and representation of Asians in the diaspora is in constant flux, I read Yew's portrayal of John's sexuality and excess as an attempt to reinvent new narrative strategies emerging in the early 1990s, pushing the envelope in order to address the concerns of Asians living in the diaspora.[33]

Politics of Gay Space

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[33] A bystander uses a cinematic reference, *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), to explain sex in public lavatories (*Porcelain* 14). *Prick Up Your Ears*, a tragic love story between Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, was the first commercial production depicting sex scenes between adults in public restrooms (*Celluloid Closet* 271). *Porcelain* takes sex in public space further by depicting an underage boy and an adult engaging in sexual activities, defying the state's regulation of sexuality and age of consent.

Before considering the tension between desire and the strenuous containment of gay sex, I want to take up the politics of queer space, a space of public intimacy that has "grown up outside the knowledge of much of the straight world," and to address the reforms made to the age of consent as a way of understanding the social and political climate for gay men in Britain (Delany 194).[34] Public sex sites such as singles bars, public restrooms, porn theaters, and public parks constitute an architectural space for casual sex and exchange of mutual pleasure, a queer space that is "necessary for a relaxed and friendly sexual atmosphere in a democratic metropolis" (Delany127). The naturalization of the heterosexual matrix by what Delany calls "the city fathers," however, results in a regime of "cleaning up" public sex locales (xii). Delany's observation is instructive in reading the closing of gay cruising geographies by London's "city fathers" in order to make heterosexuality hegemonic in *Porcelain:*

> Voice One: I don't think there's much cottaging going on anymore, especially when most of the public lavs are shut down and there's always an attendant there. Not anymore. Cottaging went out with disco. (*Porcelain* 46)

To insist on a normalization of heterosexuality, however, requires active management and policing of non-normative sexual desires, as shown in the dwindling of public erotic

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[34] Samuel R. Delany offers an in-depth account and discussion of the urban redevelopment of New York's Times Square, a reconfiguring of the city landscape and "cleaning up" of the sex-oriented business zone, ranging from changing laws about sex and hygiene to manipulating homophobia, AIDS, fear of drugs, and family values (xi). In "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner also discuss the "sexual purification of New York" by the New York City Council to protect the zone of heterosexuality (552).

locales in Britain, a scenario that recalls the rezoning of Times Square in New York. The presence of an attendant in the public restroom also gestures to the technology of surveillance, which effectively renders the waning of same-sex erotic encounters within the closet. Arresting individuals for "public indecency" (*Porcelain* 64) and "police entrapment" (65) in public restrooms comprise the strategies deployed by the fathers of culture, a culture that only endorses heteronormative reproductive coupling, to crackdown on non-normative sexual practices.

Such assaults on non-normative sexualities also rely on a disciplinary regime that includes an inscription in law of the prohibition of homosexual practices, and Yew's play comes at a time that prefigures a reform in British legal history in 1994, when British MPs would vote on the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill. Specifically, I will take the Foucauldian concept of power to punish and discipline beyond the walls of the mental asylum and prison, and uncover its new investments, particularly those that center on bodies practising non-normative sexual conduct. To be sure, prior to the reign of Queen Victoria, gay sex was punishable by death.[35] Although the specter of punishment by hanging was gone, male homosexual relation was made a crime in 1885. It was only in 1967 that British MPs voted to legalize consensual gay sexual activity, formalizing the age of consent at 21. In spite of the decriminalization of homosexuality, there remain the

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[35] For further articulations of Britain's age of consent law, see, for example, Stephen Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers, and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1991); "Legislating Fairly for Consenting Homosexuals," *The Lancet* 22 Jan. 1994: 185 – 186; "Chain Male: Gay Sex," *The Economist* 29 Jan. 1994: 60 – 61; "A Question of Conscience," *New Statesman & Society* 25 Feb. 1994: 4; Peter Tatchell, "Sweet Fourteen," *New Statesman & Society* 23 June 1995: 25; "Fair's Fair: Gay Law Reform," *The Economist* 12 July 1997: 50.

laws against consenting homosexual activities such as buggery, indecency, cruising and propositioning men, and procuring, which are considered offences (Tatchell 84 – 85). Following this legislative restriction, if a man over 21 has consensual sex with a man under 21, both have committed an illegal activity, an offence that implies criminal prosecution and custodian sentences. One of the reasons for the age of consent is to protect children from older predatory males. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act specifies that males must be over 21 in order for them to conduct their homosexual behavior in a private space. In addition, the Act states that a lavatory is a public convenience used by the people, and thus, consensual gay sex is deemed illegal in the public washroom.

In this respect, then, John commits a criminal offence by engaging in unlawful sexual relations with another man in the restroom, a public domain by legislation. In the eyes of the law, Will and John have committed a criminal offence: Will is a pedophile and John is a victim of child abuse. Since he is under 21, John is not eligible to join homosexual support groups, nor to seek medical advice and health care. As the volatile relationship between John and Will proceeds, Will becomes increasingly violent with John, and in one scene of quotidian violence, physically and sexually assaults John, who "screams in agony" and pleads with Will to use condoms (*Porcelain* 82). In this case, the health needs and sexual welfare of John are not met, even though he belongs to a category of young men vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. Operating in the interests of protecting the health and morals of society and sustaining the heterosexual matrix, the fathers of the law capture, or rather, strenuously contain, queer space by invasion and criminalization: social cleaning, police harassment, and deployment of stigmatizing rhetoric. It was not until 1994 that the British government made an

amendment to the age of consent to 18. And in 2000, the government invoked the Parliament Act to bypass the House of Lords, an appointed body of English aristocrats, and sent the Sexual Offences Act to the Queen for royal approval. Since then, the age of consent for same-sex sexual relations has been lowered to 16. In the early 1990s, however, social cleaning operated as a form of interventionist panoptic system that marginalized and stigmatized homosexual erotic exchange.

Excessive Sexuality and Containment

What the play depicts as the initial deficiency of John's masculinity (his effeteness) amounts in fact to an excess of exteriority, a failure to contain or closet his sexuality. Although he hates the public restrooms, John continues to visit them because his racial identity delimits his options to meet men. In this play of the violent tensions between a British Chinese and queer male culture, Yew evokes the London gay club scene in order to bring to the fore John's triple marginalization by the state, the Chinese community in the diaspora, and the gay community:

> Voice One: What about clubs? Don't you go—
>
> John: Sure, I go. Sometimes. And sometimes I wonder why I even bother.
>
> Voice One: Why?
>
> John: Because everyone there looks intimidating, dressed to the nines. Most of them talk among themselves, have a good time, laughing and drinking with their perfect smiles and perfect hair. And I spend the whole night standing alone in a dark corner. Pretending I'm having a barrel of

laughs, pretending I'm having a good time. Pretending I'm enjoying the music. Tapping my feet and nodding my head to the rhythm. And waiting for someone to say something to me. Something nice. Say anything to me. Perhaps it's just that I'm Oriental.

Voice One: Why do you say that?

John: White guys aren't into Orientals.

Voice One: There must be some.

John: Some. Old ones maybe. Looking for a houseboy. Trying to relive the old colonial days. (*Porcelain* 57)

In "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," Richard Fung argues that the Asian man performs the role of the "mythologized geisha or 'the good wife' as fantasized in the mail-order bride business," and notes that the "'house boy' is one of the most persistent white fantasies about Asian men" (123). Indeed, the idea of the house boy foreshadows the way in which Will perceives John in his sexual role-playing in their relationship. Tied to John's invisibility and absence in the gay culture, however, is a longing to be loved. Public restrooms have their seductive logic, then, with the pressures of the closet, the propriety of the diaspora, and the state regulation of sex to which John is subjected. In a sense, the boy-meets-boy, boy-likes-boy, and boy-kills-boy plot foregrounds the public water closet as at once the taxonomical locale of male-centered erotic activities and of the concealability of ethnic and sexual identity.

Fragile and in the words of William Hope, "not bad looking," John meets anonymous strangers at a public restroom for sex (*Porcelain* 51). At the same time, the play brings to bear what William L. Leap asserts in his introduction to *Public Sex/Gay*

*Space:* "By acknowledging that men have sex with men in public places, researchers draw attention to components of male sexuality, erotics, and desire that are not consistent with the expectations of the hetero-mainstream" (16). Previously, gay sexual practices in public spaces have been contingent on conditions of silence,[36] but John's crime of passion renders such activities public and directs the audience's attention toward the relations of power—specifically, those implicated in his transgression of the heteronormative imperative and the sexual power dynamics that characterize rice queen/rice relations.[37] Racial difference is requisite for erotic exchange between John and William, for it is precisely John's racial otherness that is necessary for William's pleasures. As a British Chinese, John lives with the stereotype of the exotic, passive Oriental projected on his body by William, who internalizes colonialist fantasies and abuses John when he comes home drunk. In this brief affair, a pattern of dominance and subjugation is at play: William slaps John "viciously," assaults him sexually, and engages in unsafe sexual practices (*Porcelain* 81). John's shooting of his lover in the restroom, a

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[36] In "Public Sex and Gay Community in Pre-Stonewall Montreal," Ross Higgins discusses the relationship between public sex and the establishment of gay community, arguing that although silence forms the norms in public sex venues, friendships and a sense of community are developed in public erotic encounters (188). Higgins terms the formation of this kind of community "network link," an acquaintanceship that leads to the development of social links beyond the casual sex settings (191).

[37] In the Afterword to his play, *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang defines the pejorative term used by his friends in the gay community: ""Rice Queen' – a gay Caucasian man primarily attracted to Asians. In these relationships, the Asian virtually always plays the role of the 'woman'; the Rice Queen, culturally and sexually, is the 'man'. This pattern of relationships had become so codified that, until recently, it was considered unnatural for gay Asians to date one another. Such men would be taunted with a phrase which implied they were lesbians" (98)

conduct unbecoming of a houseboy/rice, however, alerts the public to the fact that John's sexuality is excessive and uncontained within the topography of the water closet.

Father of the Law

John's sexual and racial encounter with William, the murder, and the cruising itself also evoke contempt and censure, as evident in Dr Worthing, whose typologizing impulse revealed to an investigative reporter from the Channel Four news team, an artsy and liberal television station, corresponds to the intensity of institutional and informal racism and homophobia in contemporary Britain:

> I think—personally, between you and me, I think this whole case is—sick. Public sex is an offense. Murder is an offense. Well, let me put it in simple words—a queer Chink who indulges in public sex kills a white man. Where would your fucking sympathies lie? Quite open and shut, isn't it? (*Porcelain* 27)

As a criminal psychologist located within the lineage of Enlightenment figures, in the sense that he embodies the Western value of rationality, Dr Worthing is willing to give the lowdown on a young gay British Chinese's erotic pursuits to an in-your-face journalist only if Channel Four prepays him one thousand pounds: "I'm sure there are other news shows that will want first dibs on this story" (*Porcelain* 16). Notwithstanding his self-serving impulse, Dr Worthing's voice is the voice of heteronormativity, the dominant voice of culture and the law. In short, his voice controls and contains male-male sexual relations. To take the term "father" less literarily, Dr Worthing stands for the father as culture, an agent whose task is to modernize and

incorporate the citizenry within an orderly civil society. As an Enlightened figure, Dr Worthing is supposed to be liberated from the grips of "tradition," as his intellect has the ability to reason, question, and transcend the tenacious conventional power structure, and to emancipate individuals from different kinds of prejudice.

Dr Worthing, however, does not invoke a sense of optimism. Rather than a forward-looking psychologist, Dr Worthing is a retrogressive "heterosexual white male," who insists that he has never "cottaged,"[38] that is had sex in a public restroom, and is "definitely not Oriental" (*Porcelain* 27). In effect, John's violence becomes a racially and sexually conditioned characteristic, as Dr Worthing alludes to this understanding when he remarks to the reporter: "It's just that I have nothing in common with those types, you know" (*Porcelain* 28). What is underscored in the media interviews is a technology of racialization as it is interimplicated with heteronormativity, that is, white and straight, not "Oriental" and gay. To put it simply, Dr Worthing underscores a distinction between John and himself. As a British Chinese excluded from Dr Worthing and the community's imaginations of sympathy, John is an absent presence in terms of social, sexual, and political representations. In short, John shifts from invisibility to hyperembodiment in the play. Intrinsic to the criminalizing logic of the interrogation, as conducted by Dr Worthing, is the specter of government involvement and the characterization of John as pathological, a characterization that relies on racially

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[38] A few man-on-the-street characters discuss the term "cottaging" in Scene 2 of the play. One of them gives an etymology of the term: "Cottaging. Why yes, I believe that the term came from the fact that public conveniences were once designed in the style of Swiss cottages. You know the little white brick cottages with black wooden frames. Very *Sound of Music*" (12).

embedded stereotypes of irrationality, and in consequence, he must be given life without parole.

Reading Dr Worthing's interrogation of John in its social, cultural, and medical context, it is possible to theorize how same-sex erotics are insistently contained and pathologized in the play. In "The Confession of the Flesh," Michel Foucault examines some of the practices in the West which are productive in unpacking the element of excess that John's sexuality represents in a hetero-patriarchal economy:

> This first volume of my book [*The History of Sexuality*] is concerned with getting an overview on something whose permanent existence in the West is difficult to deny: regulated procedures for the confession of sex, sexuality and sexual pleasures . . . . What I mean by "confession", even though I can well see that the term may be a little annoying, is all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a disclosure of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself. (215 – 216)

The confession that Dr Worthing attempts to extract from John, then, operates within a larger discursive sexual economy: John's killing of William emanates from the excess that his desire signifies, which must be pathologized and regulated in order to maintain the dominant cultural order and coherent heterosexual contract. At the same time, Dr Worthing's voice transforms John's sexual excess into surplus value as it sensationalizes his "crimes" into a form of television entertainment, providing the audience with the knowledge and secrets of race and sex. To put this another way, Dr Worthing's attempt to contain a regulated sexual excess in turn produces excess as surplus value.

John's confession, that is, his act of speaking out, is turned into a performance and spectacle, and the various commentaries offered by a variety of radio stations point to Foucault's concept of power that operates through the production and proliferation of discourses. Extending Foucault's idea of Christian confession as producing sex as a disclosure of truth that is predicated on pleasure, I suggest that the play brings to bear the use value of inner, raw, authentic feelings, the "errant fragments of an erotic art that is secretly transmitted by confession and the science of sex":

> We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 71)

John's disclosure of his brief affair with Will, a speaking out of his sexual history that involves the body and mind, then, generates pleasure among listeners and viewers. The tedious process that is involved in eliciting the disclosure of truth and sexuality, as evident in John's initial silence and Dr Worthing's persistent coaxing and concoction of a romantic affair with Suzanne, only enhances the pleasure of the secret sexual act between John and Will. In short, the disclosure process is always already implicated in an asymmetrical power relation of domination and submission, with the father of authority demanding the truth of sexuality, a discourse that purportedly represents the truth of John's moral and psychological standing.

Part of Foucault's research is to critique the authority of experts and to repudiate the voices of mediators. By narrativizing the disturbing story of John's "crime of passion" (*Porcelain* 111 –112), the mass media, together with clinical psychologist, Dr James Christian, a figure that recalls the Christian Church, and criminal psychologist, Dr Worthing, mediate, evaluate, and offer an "inside look" at the *real* thing, at a British Chinese male closeted away in the public restroom and later, incarcerated in jail. With Dr Worthing at the helm giving the media his "daily dealings" with his client and putting John's sexual identity under intense public scrutiny, the so-called "Lee murder documentary" staged and circulated by Channel Four not only makes good spectacle, it renders visible the anxiety of racial difference and erotic exchange between men, as evident in the dangers and threats that lurk in the terrain of the porcelain urinal (*Porcelain* 15). Previously a spatially compressed world for male-centered erotic interludes, the public water closet becomes a site in which John's sexuality, an excess that overflows the containment of the closet, is subject to the surveillance and social discipline of Dr Worthing, a governmental disciplinarian vested with the power to pronounce a verdict on John's non-normative desire, a desire that is in opposition to the expectations of the heteronormative culture.

Dr Jack Worthing, who calls *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) a "play about people pretending to be other people just to get laid" (*Porcelain* 22), invokes intertextual echoes with Oscar Wilde's play and its encoded homosexual allusions. Specifically, I want to consider the way Wilde's play pivots on identity. Characters are never what they appear to be: Jack pretends to be virtuous Uncle Jack Worthing in the country and adopts the name Ernest when indulging a life of pleasure in the city. It is

important, then, to understand the erotic undertones of Dr Worthing's secret double identity in the context of Wilde's play.

Bodies in Transit

One of the essential preoccupations in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the issue of names and naming, which has implications for a nexus of contacts, desire, and sexuality. If social and professional life is a kind of visceral spectacle, a site with political implications, it is significant that in Yew's play, Dr Worthing presents himself in the media as "the technician of behavior who must measure the punishment for the corrective effect it will have—on the guilty party or others," to borrow Foucault's phrasing ("Talk Show"140).[39] It is no accident that Yew names a psychiatrist after a character whose identity is highly suspect, especially given that in Wilde's play Jack Worthing is found in a black leather handbag that is placed in the cloakroom at a railway station. In Wilde's play the concealment of identity is at issue—in the handbag, in the cloakroom, and in the dressing-room—gesturing to the already closeted body in transit. Timothy d'Arch Smith takes up this idea of double identity by citing the final sonnet from John Gambril Nicholson's homoerotic ballad, "Of Boys' Names."[40] As Smith

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[39] In "Talk Show," Foucault contends that as far back as the eighteenth-century, a great number of people escape the laws and it explains the reason when a criminal is caught, the punishment is "formidable"—because the punishment is to "'set an example,'" an "exercising of punitive power" (140).

[40] d'Arch Smith traces Wilde's social interactions and literary network in order to understand the implicit allusions of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* According to Smith, part of the origins of Wilde's play reside in the *Chameleon,* an Oxford undergraduate magazine published in 1894 that ran to only one issue due to the negative

suggests, the name "Ernest" is a coded word for homosexual desire, and by extension, the Ernest in *The Importance of Earnest* is an allusion to the double life that Jack Worthing is living. In Wilde's play, the double lives of his characters permit them to emancipate themselves from the constraints of society and the Victorian policing of physical desire and intimacy. While the play registers the mobility of Jack's identity transitions, his tactics of manipulating the disjunctures in space (town and country), and his circumvention of the strict codes of late Victorian morality, he lives in a period of tremendous anxiety about morality, miscegenation, racial health, male same-sex love, and sexual identities. Yew's allusions to Wilde's play suggests that bodies and identities continue to be subjected to discursive inscription and control within a nexus of power relations in contemporary Britain, where the power of domination that Dr Worthing has over John is misrecognized due to the psychiatrist-patient relation. At the same time, such allusions suggest that despite his protests otherwise Dr Worthing is closeted, a

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publicity and derision of Wilde's court trials of 1895. Wilde contributes his "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" to the magazine, which juxtaposes his series of short epigrams with Alfred Douglas's two poems describing homosexual desire, "The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name" and "In Praise of Shame" (Smith 54). Two other contributors to the magazine are Jack Bloxam, the editor, and John Gambril Nicholson, both of whom are Uranian (a lover of adolescent boys) writers. Nicholson's public proclamations of his love for Ernest are captured in *Love in Ernest,* a collection of poems published in 1892, all of which relate a love affair with an unnamed person from the time the poet first sees his lover to their breakup. Though this is not the occasion to recapitulate Nicolson's sonnet, I include the closing quatrain from "Of Boys' Names" in order to decode the encryption of Earnest in Wilde's play and to reference it to *Porcelain:*

> My little Prince, Love's mystic spell
> Lights all the letters of your name,
> And you, if no one else, can tell
> Why Ernest sets my heart a-flame. (qtd. in Smith xviii)

I am grateful to Wilhelm Emilsson for bringing Oscar Wilde to my attention.

closeting that enables him to traverse in and out of his sexual identities, taking pleasure in the confession he elicits from John for ostensibly disciplinary, heteronormative purposes.

"Earnest" is the word for Jack Worthing's double life, connoting a split in the personality much like Dr Worthing in Yew's play. Dr Jack Worthing of Yew's play presents himself as a professional psychiatrist interrogating a criminal in the cell, and escapes to another site to don the persona of Ernest so that he can transgress the limits of morality and enjoy his private indulgence of pleasure. The play raises the question of identity, that is, people are not what they appear to be. Already the play shows Dr Worthing's acknowledgement of deception in order to extract John's confession, and extends its interest in deception to John's parents' pretending, police entrapment, and Will's lying.

It is worth noting that the barrage of media blitz and moral panic resulting from John's crime uncannily mirror the tabloid excesses of Wilde's homosexual scandals and courtroom trials in 1895 under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 that legislated against homosexual liaisons. The objective of this critique is not to recover the actualities of the late Victorian age, but to offer a way of reading those discourses and the apparatus of legal, medical, and social enforcement that continue to exert ideological force in the twentieth century. Dr Worthing seems to promote the state regulation of sex, but his name recapitulates the fact that he is a master of duplicity, which means that he is interested in dissecting sex only insofar as it lends itself to respectability, self-righteousness, and monetary gains. His role is to pretend to be outraged on behalf of society by men cruising men in trafficked terrain. Reading the literary and historical

allusions to Wilde's play, it is possible to see how Ernest and Jack Worthing transmogrify into the face of Dr Worthing. In this manner, the violence of the British state reverses upon itself and the criminalization of John's sexual transgression, illegitimate sex practice, and homicide refracts back upon a contaminated and hypocritical version of law and governmentality.

Father of the Nation

The web of identifications in *Porcelain* extends beyond Dr Worthing's identification with Wilde's Jack Worthing. A network of associations between Mr Lee, John's father, and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1991, is inscribed in the family name "Lee."[41] Specifically, I want to use the father of the nation to think about the relationships constructed between the body and the nation in the play. John's father, Mr Lee, is an especially evocative appellation given it is also the surname of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of the nation. Yew names John's father, Mr Lee, a name connecting the cultural force of Singapore and Britain. Foucault's notion of a "technology of sex," which has been implemented by the bourgeoisie by the end of eighteenth century, is worth elaborating as a way of comprehending Lee Kuan Yew's control of procreation and sexualization of the female body (*History* 116). The "technology of sex," Foucault continues, "made sex not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well; to be more exact, sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under

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[41] I thank Philip Holden for reminding me of Lee Kuan Yew.

surveillance" (116).

Both Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devas have provided much insight into state fatherhood in Singapore, approaching the treatment of nationality, sexuality, and race, with a consideration of "the nation's father of founding fathers, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew" (108). Through legal and medical institutions, Lee discursively constituted and managed sexualities, tracking and calibrating the bodies of women and their reproductive sexuality. According to Heng and Devan, "internalized orientalism in fact supplies state fatherhood with an efficient mechanism for the processing of Western culture—an apparatus of definition, selection, and control that manipulates the rationalizing power of Western modes of knowledge and organization for the efficient management of local capitalism" (115). In short, "internalized orientalism," Heng and Devan remark, "serves a paternal master" (115). In 1983, Lee expressed his anxiety and charged highly-educated women in Singapore for not reproducing enough babies as a "*patriotic duty*" (Heng and Devan 111; original emphasis). As Heng and Devan write, beneath the crisis of sexuality as non-procreative is "the crisis of *paternity* and reproduction": Mr Lee recalls the days when women were coerced into bearing children, the disciplining of female reproductive sexuality, the enforcement of marriages of convenience, and the dependence of paternal power (111; original emphasis). Here Lee is the state father of a former British colony, ruling the citizens with a rod of iron, and closing off the possibilities of non-normative and non-reproductive sexualities. For all its procreation logic, the state father's "autonomous birthing of a nation" (Heng and Devan 112) also subjects the citizens to what Tim Davis would call "the panoptic gaze" that "exists in the form of heterosexism and internalized homophobia" (287). Transgressive sexuality,

however, differentiates John from Lee's Victorian ideas of masculine manhood.[42] If received ideas of women's sexuality, understood as a site of reproduction, have shifted, threatening Lee's absolute power, John's non-procreative sexuality violates the law of the father, pointing to the emerging crisis of definition of the male body. However, in "denouncing and speaking out" the sources of power in the play, Yew is engaging in a Foucauldian discourse of struggle: "it is because to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets, is the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power" ("Intellectuals" 79). Lee's obdurate severity makes him an authority in Singapore, but John's father's paternal authority is rendered ineffective in Britain, and, so, in the diaspora. John's father, by contrast, loses control of his daughter and son, whose sexuality is not productive and, worse, is uncontainable within the closet.

The Father in the Diaspora

John's sexual transgression further points to the disintegration of the Lee family, a sacrosanct institution diminished by a son and a daughter who fail to live up to the expectations of filial piety and Chinese culture which is, at the same time, under siege from the mass media. While filial piety, a value associated with Chineseness, appears to

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[42] For an excellent discussion of masculinity in Singapore, see Philip Holden, "A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*" ; and "The Significance of Uselessness: Resisting Colonial Masculinity in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise.*"

remain unscathed by the forces of modernity in *The Wedding Banquet*, it seems, however, to fall apart in *Porcelain*. In particular, the paternal power that John's father represents is being hollowed out from within. In *The Wedding Banquet*, the father deploys the "closet as a form of protection" (Lane 270), of cultural institutions exemplifying "Chineseness," and upholds the heterosexual imperative for the community to see. In *Porcelain*, the closet, as a site of erotic engagement, registers the tension between heteronormative public morality and the threatening elements of male-centered sexual practice. For Mr Lee, his son's sexual transgression stands outside a procreative framework and brings shame to the family, and his unfilial behavior, that is his failure to honor his father, also bespeaks a steady erosion of paternal authority. When a reporter from Channel Four wants to interview Mr Lee to do a "special documentary" (*Porcelain* 54) about John, the distressed father denies having a son eight times, and, finally, renounces his son: "No son! No son! My son is dead" (55). In a later interview with the media reporter, nonetheless, Mr Lee, his identity itself closeted "in silhouette," laments coming to England, thinking that it would be a good place to bring up his children:

> But I think I make mistake. Big mistake. I have a daughter who shame my family. Go about with a lot of white men. Stay at their house at night . . . . Now I have a son who no respect me. But he intelligent and go to university very soon. Now no more university. No more son. Neighbor all talk behind my back—of murder. In toilet. Bethnal Green. I so ashamed. So angry . . . . My wife pretend nothing happen. Pretend everything okay. (*Porcelain* 85)

Here, Mr Lee becomes timorous, loses control of his language, and begins to falter in his speech as he realizes his crumbling universe. Mr Lee disavows his son's homosexual identity, an identity that is particularly charged in a racially stratified society, and accordingly his disowning of John is predicated on his son's non-normative erotic orientation.

Family ties bear social import in the diaspora, but they turn out to be elusive and capricious, as the paternal figure vested with authority proves to be just a nostalgic romantic illusion. In this, John violates the cultural roles and expectations of his father and fails to conform to the codes of the community, which operate in the interest of heteronormativity and impose a propriety that is the negation of freedom of expression and choice, especially sexual choice. The father-son relationship represented in this scene, then, is seen as a symbolic manifestation of the conflict between the young and old generations within the diaspora. In fact, John's parents never visit him in jail because they are "too embarrassed to come" (*Porcelain* 109). *Porcelain* is radical in the sense that Yew invokes the name of Mr Lee, the name of the nation's founding father, as a way of speaking against the paternal master and of resisting disciplinary heteronormalizing forces.[43] In diasporic Britain, John's father is utterly distraught by his fissured family,

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[43] Colleen Lye has produced much insight into Singapore government's "political and moral censorship . . . . where 'consent' is 'manufactured' by the state, what gets seen, heard, or read therefore bears a direct relationship to what the state apparatus decides is ideologically appropriate" (265). Yew is cognizant of the power of the authoritarian government and the "suppression of artistic freedom" (Talib 103). Yew's invocation of the former premier makes sense given his brush with censorship. After vetting Yew's first Aids play, *As If He Hears* (1988), the Singapore's censor board banned it, disapproving "its sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality" (Raymond 2). As Yew says, the government "said that it was 'contrary to their social value system to have a

specifically his disobedient son and daughter, both of whom adopt a decentered lifestyle and have no sense of shame. What is especially apparent in the play is the father's inadequacy in relation to the paternal roles he is supposed to perform, that is, he fails to preserve the heteronormative definitions of ethnic identity and community (*Porcelain* 109). In sharp contrast, the father figure in Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* occupies a supreme position in the patriarchal system, commanding respect from his family.

Although *Porcelain* registers a loss in the status of John's father, Dr Worthing, the father of dominant culture, has the power to execute laws and to regulate desire: he has the power to create the closet, enforcing a regime of discipline that involves crackdown, hygienic policing, and segregation. As the putative father of dominant culture, Dr Worthing's decision to put John in jail for life is law: there will be no ensuing discussion about it because the father is not only present but exerting an authority and control. But Dr Worthing's verdict precludes any serious attention to historical specificities, and throughout the numerous interviews that Dr Worthing has with John, the murder is decontexualized and attributed mainly to John's irrationality rather than the contemporary racial and sexual predicaments of living as a gay British Chinese in London. Sentencing John to life without parole is always, ultimately, a disciplining of both race and sexuality as a potentially disruptive problem, as a threatening excess.

By rendering public what is necessarily silenced in order to sustain the

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homosexual character portrayed positively onstage'" (Drake 3). Later, Yew rewrote the play, and TheatreWorks Singapore produced it in 1989.

heterosexual construct in the community, *Porcelain's* focus on public restroom male-centered erotic practices constitutes a resistance to the ways Asians in the diaspora are represented in the dominant culture, and a critique of the hegemonic containment of male homoerotic desire. The play shows the closet as a site of sexual excess and the impossibility and failure of containment. As well, the play subverts the seductive portrayal of Asians as model minority, and depicts the tension between desire and normalization: the closet is the locus of horror, the site where the inexplicable terrors of same-sex desires can be scrutinized, and where Dr Worthing strips John of his humanity and diminishes him to his sexual practices. In *The Wedding Banquet,* the closet functions to sustain a supposedly inviolate ethnic identity within the diaspora, but *Porcelain* breaks the silence about the question of same-sex sexuality in the diasporic Chinese community, responding to the histories of sexuality and race, taking into account a nexus of conflicting discourses and desires, and showing the audience that the world is inflected with difference. The play poses questions about the legitimacy of reproductive apparatuses, disrupting the paternal's voice by showing that in the spaces of the diaspora and away from the hegemony of the nation's father that procreative sexualities are unstable.

## Chapter Two

## "Talking Back"[44] : Body, Feminism, and Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*

> As an avowed feminist, I have had to learn to trust, respect, and love women; I have had to overcome my sexism, my preference for male buddies because of my preference for male bodies.
>
> *Among the White Moon Faces* (226)

In her essay, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," Mitsuye Yamada provocatively argues that Asian American women have not acknowledged that they "*were* oppressed," that they, "the visible minority," are "invisible," and that they are not listened to even as they are allowed to "speak freely": "We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us 'This is so uncharacteristic of you.' To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone" (40). Yamada's insistence on Asian American women making themselves visible in order to reconceptualize the relations between identity, home, community, and political change accords with Shirley Lim's discussion of the invisibility of Asian American women and her anger at the aspects of race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, language, and accents that determine an individual's position in an America that continues to be hegemonizing. What I want to draw out of Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* is the way in which it unsettles not only Anglo-American feminist theory, boundaries,

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[44] I borrow the term from bell hooks's *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black.*

identities, personal histories, but also the questioning of conventional notions of experience that exclude as well as ignore the multiple utterances of women from diverse backgrounds. At the core of Lim's concern is to remap boundaries and renegotiate racial and gender connections in the diaspora by interrogating the homogeneity and political and discursive stability of Eurocentric America, a state that supports white supremacy and the marginalization of women, particularly Third World women. Lim does not deny the relevance and the appeal of Anglo-American feminism in addressing women's oppression, but confronts its inadequacy in providing a space for the "plural cultural utterances of gender differences" and its failure in recognizing "the divergent race, national, class, religious and linguistic selves among women" ("Asians" 249). By "oppression," I refer to what bell hooks and Sherene H. Razack call "absence of choice" (*Feminist Theory* 5; *Looking White People* 34).

In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich contends that much of poetry and prose by women in the 1970s "is charged with anger":

> I think we need to go through that anger, and we will betray our own reality if we try, as Virginia Woolf was trying, for an objectivity, a detachment, that would make us sound more like Jane Austen or Shakespeare. We know more than Jane Austen or Shakespeare knew: because our lives are more complex, more than Shakespeare because we know more about the lives of women, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf included. (98)

Rich points out how, although she was trying to write in the 1950s, she "was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact

with her own being" (95). She notes, "my anger and frustration were hard to acknowledge in or out of poems because in fact I cared a great deal about my husband and my children" (Rich 95). For Rich, women using anger in a positive way can lead to change, to creating their own subjectivity. Rich's idea of using anger in literary expression serves as a productive way to read critically Lim's memoir,[45] a narrative that deploys the language of strong emotion to recuperate personal power, refusing to be negatively marked by her racialized status as "resident alien" (*White Moon* 197) or "strange woman" (225). In what sense, and to what ends, can the feelings of anger and, sometimes, the combination of anger and humor be used to negotiate identity, and to claim the contested textual and material terrain of America? This chapter attempts to answer this question by attending to autobiographical practice, and to the relationship between Anglo-American feminism, a theory constructed by upper-middle-class white women writers, and a feminist scholarship and critiques of society that include women of different nationalities, languages, places of birth, races, and classes.

My critical reading of *Among the White Moon Faces* is informed by the creative

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[45] Frequently, critics use "autobiography" and "memoir" interchangeably. Nevertheless, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* offers a distinction between these two terms: "A memoir is a history or record composed from personal observation and experience. Closely related to, and often confused with, autobiography, a memoir usually differs chiefly in the degree of emphasis placed on external events; whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter, writers of memoir are usually persons who have played roles in, or have been close observers of, historical events and whose main purpose is to describe or interpret the events" ("memoir"). Laura Marcus asserts that autobiography often focuses exclusively on self-knowledge and inner development, to the elision of other problems and concerns. Critics of autobiography have excluded memoirs from discussion because they do not "exemplify self-analysis" (Marcus 183). Several "seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers," Marcus notes, "entitled their 'fictional' works 'histories', 'lives' or 'memoirs' in order to avoid the negative (and increasingly feminized) connotations of the generic marker 'novel' or 'romance'" (238).

writing and theoretical work done in African American feminism. I will draw on Lim's critical articles and interviews as a way to read productively the text, especially the insistent gender- and race-inflected self in the diaspora. The memoir does not underestimate the impact of Anglo-American feminism and its potential for oppositional, political practice and social change. In its conceptions and political and social objectives, Anglo-American feminism is a women's movement predicated on the assumption that female oppression is the result of sexism. As Angela Davis has noted in "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," that female emancipation should not only focus on sexual politics: "The narrow feminist [bourgeois] approach fails to acknowledge the specificity of the social subjugation of the women who live outside the privileged class under capitalism" (173). Revolutionary feminist movements, Davis says, "found [their] most enthusiastic adherents among young 'middle-class' white women," who elided the problems of class exploitation, colonial imperialism, and racial domination (147). hooks's insistence on a constantly evolving feminist theory in "Black Women Shaping Feminist Theory" resonates with Lim's position on Asian American literature and feminist issues: "We resist hegemonic dominance of feminist thought by insisting that it is a theory in the making, that we must necessarily criticize, question, reexamine, and explore new possibilities" (139).

Racial Blind Spot of Anglo-American Feminism

As feminist critics of color have pointed out, women of color must negotiate within the Anglo-American feminist framework that often fails to meet their needs and multiple levels of subordination. Exploring the ways in which women of color are

rethinking issues such as identity politics, knowledge, and experience, Dionne Espinoza, for example, speaks of the concern of academic and feminist activists of color who are keen to conceive "theories of multiplicity and subject formation—woven against particularly Anglo feminist critiques of identity politics": "But the suspicion of the theory voiced by many feminist theorists of color originates not only from their concern with finding themselves mimicking postures of domination or with being duped by the 'master's tools'; the suspicion also comes from a grounded and (dare I say) *visceral* response to exclusion" (46; original emphasis). Taking second-wave feminist critics, particularly Susan Gubar, to task for maintaining "the cultural capital of victimhood on the side of white feminism," Rey Chow persuasively argues that in *Jane Eyre*, "exclusion, subordination, and captivity—negative experiences which justify Jane's anger as a social outcast—are in the course of the narrative converted into the means of her empowerment, final acceptance by the social order that entails her own control and expulsion of others" (161). By "others," Chow refers to "other supplements—the other kinds of women, the non-Western men as well as women" in "classic white feminine/feminist texts" (163). The insight afforded by Chow's critique of "what ails white feminism" is instructive, in terms of how white feminist criticism sees itself as "a culture of defense" and ignores the specificities of domination and subordination (162).[46] Citing Naomi Shor, an eminent white scholar, and her complaint against

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[46] Critical essays that consider Anglo-American feminism and its reductionism include Helen Grice, "Asian American Feminisms: Developments, Dialogues, Departures"; and Leti Volpp, "(Mis)Identifying Culture: Asian Women and the 'Cultural Defense.'" Grice also compiled a bibliography, "Asian American Feminist Thought: A Current Bibliographic Resource Guide," listing a range of fictional and non-fictional material with a feminist theme.

feminist critique moving away from universalism and coming "to a dreadful and dangerous place of race essentialism and regressive ethnic enclaves," Razack argues that "a homogeneous description of women's oppression re-centers white women and leaves racism unexamined" (168).

In her discussion of "'colorless' feminism," in "Asians in Anglo-American Feminism: Reciprocity and Resistance," Lim views "feminist theory that ignores the place of cultural and racial difference in women, as an expression of Anglo-American-centric colonialist theory" ("Asians" 249). She remarks that Western feminism has included race as a category of criticism, making space for hers as well as other Asian women's voices to be heard; however, they "are not much more visible" than before Western white women included race as a category (qtd. in Manaf 12). For Lim, a feminist discourse that incorporates increasingly "more white and privileged women—Olive Schreiner, Jean Rhys, Isak Dinesen and Nadine Gordimer—as women's voices from the Third World" only leads her to read Anglo-American feminisms as "another manifestation of Anglo-American imperialism" ("Asians" 250). In this vein, I argue that Lim's work represents a gesture toward reconstituting an inclusive feminist theory, a practice that emerges from her own anger as well as the gaps and limits in Anglo-American feminisms. As such, her memoir and critical essays represent a culture-specific discourse that registers the needs of marginalized women, men, and children of color.

I mention Lim's insistence on marginalized women naming, speaking, and reflecting upon their experiences as epistemological acts of resistance to domination, oppression, and silence because racially privileged and educated women have always

been legitimate producers of knowledge and theories. Building on the insights of feminist and critical theorists on the ability of autobiography to represent the self, I examine Lim's feminism in America and Asia, and the problematic of what Razack calls the "interlocking systems of domination," in which "each system of oppression [relies] on the other to give it meaning" (12). As Razack demonstrates in her feminist reappraisal of "complicity and the interlocking nature of systems of oppression," a nexus of hierarchical and material relations "surrounds our capacity to be autonomous—other women who are our babysitters, domestic workers, secretaries" (34). Razack's advice is most valuable for its attention to an inquiry into women's implication in domination of Third World women, even as they seek liberatory feminist politics. I will also consider the impossibilities of autobiographical narrative to present a coherent, knowable, emotional self as a way to read critically the errors, contradictions, and confusions in the text. As a resistance to the cultural inscription of the body by white dominant culture, I argue that Lim employs Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque to demystify and undercut the myth of a unified white bodily subject as a political act of re-vision.

## Feminist Memoir

Lim's memoir, then, involves what hooks calls "'talking back,'" that is, "speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (*Talking Back* 5). For hooks, speaking is a political act of resistance, so that thinking and writing constitute a reclaiming of self, an experience she terms "self-recovery" (30). To have the impact of political and social changes, the traffic of talking back across political and textual terrain needs to be increased. I read Lim's text as a talking back, a rhetorical strategy designed to address

the multifaceted experiences of women of color, and to engage in a "feminist movement that transforms self, community, and society" (*Talking Back* 182). Worth mentioning in this context is Sidonie Smith's deployment of autobiography as a way of "talking back" in "The Universal Subject, Female Embodiment, and the Consolidation of Autobiography" (20). According to Smith, "the official histories of the subject remain vulnerable to the destabilizing strategies of the 'others' who have been only inexactly excluded, all those who have been identified with the carnivalesque or grotesque" (20).

Through the mode of self-writing, Lim gets to talk back to a spectrum of discourses that position her as a racialized and gendered subject in Malaysia and America. In terms of literary conventions in Asia, Lim notes that the Asian woman writer must channel her artistic creation of self to "material 'creations'—childbirth" and domestic duties ("Semiotics" 443). Lim explains that the "Asian man is not free of material constraints either, but there has long been in Asian societies a tradition of male as writer that was denied to women: the Confucian scholar; Brahmin priest; court advisors; government bureaucrats; recorders of social action and journalists; privileged nationalists selected for foreign education and service" (443). By exercising her own agency in telling her stories, and by her audacity of insisting on a narrative presence, Lim oversteps literary conventions, that is, taking on the role of an English-language writer from Asia and "becom[ing], if only in her writing, undomesticated, wild" (445).[47] As

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[47] Clearly concerned with the freedom of creativity, choice, and movement, Lim herself comments on "this wildness" that she cherishes: it "cannot be practiced as is within a university structure," but as an administrator at both the universities in America and Hong Kong, she "accept[s] the constraints of institutional life and tr[ies] to negotiate with them" (qtd. in Fox 2). This tension between freedom and institutional bureaucracy is echoed in the memoir: "Institutions are the housekeepers for minds that do not live in

well, she transgresses the structures of domination and relations of power to create oppositional knowledge. At play in the narrative is a calculated, particularized strategy of dialectic and identity politics that Lim employs to speak and to be listened to.

Rather than simply transcribing her experiences, Lim deploys the autobiographical mode as a process of analyzing and evaluating those experiences. In this sense, the act of self-writing constitutes a theoretical project to recreate the self by transforming her way of seeing or what Rich calls "[r]e-vision[ing]—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (90). And it is through writing, "an act of dis-alienation, of sensory claims," that Lim confronts the ways in which both majority and minority subjects are implicated in the investment and circulation of racialized and gendered positions (*White Moon* 120). In this respect, I read the text as a process to alter her optical experience, to articulate the epistemic violence of seeing and the white gaze, and to theorize race within feminist parameters that include difference and counter-hegemony. As such, I approach Lim's text by examining the ability of autobiography to create a discursive space for women of color to negotiate their identities, and, simultaneously, to assert their agency and articulate their concerns in a gendered and raced economy governed by asymmetrical power relations. I then turn to Lim's politics of the body and skin to discuss how the text interrogates visual politics and the overdetermination of race and gender contradictions

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houses, and I am frequently disturbed by the incompatibility between the wildness I value and believe must be valued in women and by the linear cage of academic competition that structures universities. Do wild feminists live in universities? Can they?" (*White Moon* 226). Elsewhere in the narrative, Lim gives an account of her penchant for fast motorbikes as a young woman, but "the Suzuki boys" find her "too wild" (*White Moon* 90).

in the formation of American and Malaysian identities, identities that are based on a recognition of difference and exclusion. In focusing on the ability of the autobiographical narrative to redefine and recreate the self, I am interested in how the text makes visible the realities of race and language in Southeast Asia and within the larger context of a U.S. cultural imaginary. I will draw on African American feminist theory as a way to read productively the Asian female body in transition and the issues of identity that transition raises. A feminist theory that promises a better understanding of the world and structures of domination, then, involves the voices and critical practice of women of color, translating them into the formation of political alliances to effect social change. Before turning to Lim's memoir as a recitation of personal narrative and an assertion of Malaysian American identity, I want to take a brief look at the limitations of the genre of autobiography to reveal the absolute truth of the stable subject by virtue of its non-fictional status and authority of authenticity with the reading public.

## Limits of Memoir Writing

To narrate his or her life-story, the autobiographical subject assembles past memories and reframes them in her or his own terms, which include elements of fantasy and excess. In their introduction to *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that the complexities of postmodern life undercut any idea of a "consistent, transparent, and noncontradictory" subject: "*On a daily basis, then, personal narrators assume the role of the* bricoleur *who takes up bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space*"

(14; original emphasis). In "The Possibilities of Auto/Biography," Mary Evans gives a detailed discussion of the ways in which an autobiographical subject creates herself or himself in relationship to fiction, so that autobiographical storytelling is "a mythical construct of our society and our social needs" (1). Evans proposes that "what auto/biography often cannot do is to sever its links with narrative fiction" (24).

The issues of fictive components and textual authenticity are an important element in discussions of autobiographical discourse and representation of the past. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's '"Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," questions the "function" of introducing a '"Chinese' cultural presence" in Asian American fiction "because a history of controversy exists in Asian cultural politics concerning issues of authenticity" (183). These aspects of autobiographical narrative raised by critics are particularly relevant in considering the erroneous geographical location, contradictory perspectives, and ambiguous recounting of events in Lim's memoir. I am thinking here specifically of Lim's idea of memoir writing as a "straight-forward historical narrative" that requires "the need to do historical research and be accurate" (Wang 158).[48] Because of Lim's belief that she has "a special voice," and that she "came from a special kind of community, the Peranakan community, which had been

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[48] Emphasizing her refusal "to be a second-rate Kingston" (Wang 158), Lim also talks about memoirs "bring[ing] expectations with them" in a conversation with Valerie Miner and Judith Barrington: "I did not want to write a memoir like *The Woman Warrior* – which I think is a beautiful book, but one that does not in all ways fulfill the expectations that we have for the genre of memoir. I was looking for history rather than storytelling" ("Reticence" 2). Lim's research on historical facts aside, the disparity between what she remembers about her life and what she says or writes elsewhere underscores the precarious nature of memory in autobiographical narrative. While it is possible to overlook some degree of fictionality in the memoir, the glaring inaccuracies and inconsistencies in *White Moon* are difficult to ignore.

predicted as 'dead' or 'dying' for the longest time," she intends to inscribe her community in writing and renders "more permanent a community that is passing out" (qtd. in Manaf 10). Moreover, the deployment of Malay vocabulary instantly invites a sense of authenticity. As I will argue, while Lim makes use of her Peranakan culture to effect, including transporting the reader to the Asian diaspora and different tropical locales and Malay linguistic terrain, the memoir is fraught with lapses of memory and distortions.[49]

Meditating on the writing process in "Writing Autobiography," hooks notes that the longer she took to recapitulate the events of the past, the "memory seemed less and less clear" (430). hooks's description of her coming to terms with "the fiction that is a part of all retelling, remembering" is helpful in elucidating problems that emerge from Lim's attempt to inscribe a history of the self in Malaysia and as an immigrant subject in America (431). Telling the story of her life through different memories, hooks elegantly describes:

> They came in a surreal dreamlike style which made me cease to think of them as strictly autobiographical because it seemed that myth, dream, and reality had merged. There were many incidents that I would talk about with my siblings to see if they recalled them. Often we remembered together a general outline of an

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[49] I would recall, here, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1990), set in Manila, with insertions of Tagalog and Spanish phrases throughout the narrative. In contrast to *Among the White Moon Faces*, Hagedorn refuses to translate these vernacular phrases, a literary strategy that gestures to the novel's decenteredness and cultural resistance to English America.

> incident but the details were different for us. This fact was a constant reminder of the limitations of autobiography, of the extent to which autobiography is a personal story telling—a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them. ("Writing Autobiography" 430)

In this sense, Lim's narrative can no longer be taken for granted, and no longer operates as a geocultural and social reality.

Lim's geographical descriptions of the balmy Malaysian landscape are clearly deliberate, for other sections of the narrative reinforce the lush and serene tropics. So, for example, describing her visit to Penang and living with her Second Brother and his wife in 1974, Lim depicts Universiti Sains situated on an exotic island and decentered from the hustle and bustle of mainland Malaysia: "Unlike the single barrack of Hostos Community College, Universiti Sains covered verdant acres. Maroon bougainvillaea spilled over low walls, and trees of golden showers and flame-of-the-forest tossed their ferry leaves and brilliant yellow and scarlet in the afternoon breeze that blew inland from the cooler South China Sea" (*White Moon* 174). Yet, the invoking of the South China Sea and Penang island results in gross geographical inaccuracy. The very idea of Penang facing the South China Sea is unthinkable—both Penang and Malacca are located on the West coast of Malaysia, which means that the breeze can only blow from the Straits of Malacca or the Indian Ocean, while the East coast of Malaysia gets the breeze from the South China Sea.

In a very brief review of Lim's memoir, Trudy Bush writes, "Lim vividly

recreates her early life in Malacca, a small city on the South China Sea, where she and her brothers grew up with little supervision except for that provided by their Catholic schooling" (2). This conjunction of Malacca and Penang with the South China Sea, a conventional topographical connection that both Lim and Bush latch onto is what Edward Said terms "imaginative geography" (55). Salman Rushdie's observation of the Indo-British fiction is especially instructive in thinking about the diaspora in the context of Lim's memoir:

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back . . . . But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of claiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands. (10)

Discussing this notion of fictional homeland and authenticity in "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong posits that American publishers know that their reading public will not be keen on reading the lives of immigrants, but rather, they know that it is "traditional China (later, Communist China) that excites the American imagination" (306). Bush, as part of an American reading public with expectations of a "kind of culturally mediated discourse" from a Chinese American writer, reviews Lim's memoir based on "American preconceptions of what the Orient is/should be" ("'Sugar Sisterhood'" 187). What happens is that the South China Sea becomes putatively inscribed in the backdrop of the

text. The paradox is that, to cater to the needs of an American reading audience, Lim has to retain the affective and re-orient the geocultural homeland on the South China Sea, rendering effectively the blurring of textuality and social reality.

The erroneous location of Penang and the centripetal drive toward the South China Sea, however, might be read as a way in which Lim deals with the alienation, isolation, and discrimination she experiences as a woman of color in America by reimagining the Peranakan diaspora, Chinese immigrants from South China. Fantastic spatial imagining serves as a sentimental nexus of escape from the daily oppression and racial differentiation. Writing as an Asian woman, Lim expresses her consciousness of her racial identity and the palpability of color in diasporic America. Central to the narrative is the construction of the woman of color as a foreigner: "I sat on the benches beside Swan Lake in Boston Commons, always aware that my Asian body gave me away as a foreigner. It was as if I walked inside an invisible bubble, and all downtown Boston hubbubbed around me, visible but out of my reach" (*White Moon* 154). Because of an intense longing for home, where home is associated with ideas of race, language, gender, history, and a sense of belonging in an imagined community, then, an exotic, faraway homeland located on the South China Sea holds sway. As such, the South China Sea represents a link that joins Lim to an imaginative ancestral Peranakan home in South China. Clearly, Lim is driven by the pressures of the diaspora, the wish to cater to the needs of the American reading audience, and the need to be heard.[50] But Lim's

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[50] Quite relevant here is hooks's observation with reference to the African American artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and fame: "To be un-famous is to be rendered invisible. Therefore, one is without choice. You either enter the phallocentric battlefield of representation and play the game or you are doomed to exist outside history" ("Altars"

geographical misdirection also bespeaks a condition of restlessness, foreignness, exile, memory, and resistance. Romanticizing an affirming family and community foregrounded in an Asian setting and juxtaposing it with a decidedly discriminatory American landscape, then, function as a compensation for displacement and dislocation. Malacca and Penang become an excessive, vestiginal, mythical homeland, sites that Lim has no desire to return to permanently, but that operate as a means of recovering an imaginary tie with the larger-than-life South China and as a strategic intervention in the diaspora.

As a text chronicling the events in Lim's life, *Among the White Moon Faces* presents details that not only call for verification, but also lead to confusion and throw the credibility of the narrative into radical doubt. I turn to such examples in order to bring the notion of autobiography as equivocal narrative into a critical thinking of Lim's revisions. First, Lim expresses her attraction to Eurasians and Indians, "as a way out of the fixedness of race identity" in Malaysia (*White Moon* 122). In particular, Eurasians do not ridicule others due to their difference. Her thoughts about Eurasians in a critical article written prior to the memoir, however, contradict this positive portrait. Reminiscing about her childhood days in Malacca, Lim describes the small town inhabited by diverse races and cultures, and recalls "snobbish Eurasians who thought too highly of themselves" ("Asians" 246).

Second, Lim speaks of the Commonwealth Literature course, a course covering

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32). Thus, to gain visibility in America, Lim simply plays the game, giving what the readers want. For an in-depth discussion of Asian American visibility, the cultural marketplace, and textual representation, see David Leiwei Li, "Ethnic Agency and the Challenge of Representation" (175 – 203).

postcolonial, non-canonical literature, she took at the University of Malaya and takes up an entire paragraph to describe Dr. Wismal, the Malayan professor offering the course. I want to cite a few sentences from immediately after Dr. Wismal's description in order to compare them with what Lim says in an interview that is completed through correspondence and email in June 1999:

> Together with Amos Tutuola's and Chinua Achebe's novels from Africa and the works of West Indian writers, including V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming, we finally read a few Malayan writers in Dr. Wismal's course. Studying the poems of Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam, many of which lamented an alienation from Malayan society, I saw the contrast between their concerns and those in Wordsworth's poetry.
>
> (*White Moon* 120)

In her interview with Kirpal Singh, however, Lim says:

> I remember reading Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, h.d., Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry James, and so forth, and finding this an utterly different and distinctive literature. Then, when Lloyd Fernando taught the 'Commonwealth Literature' course at the University of Malaya in 1966, we read Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Ee Tiang Hong, and others, and suddenly I glimpsed what it was to write out of—both in the sense of grounded in but also at a place away from—the British tradition."
>
> (qtd. in Singh 138)

Who taught the Commonwealth Literature course in 1966? In these quotations, I suggest that the inconsistencies signify moments of disconnectedness with her Malayan homeland, and the slips register the ambivalence unknowingly felt as a diasporic subject.

I am invoking these passages and inconsistencies to make the point that in Lim's search for her identity, home, and discontents, she has undergone psychological and geographical transitions as well as slips of memory. Moreover, ambivalence, contradictions, fictionalization, and tensions are axiomatic in an autobiographical narrative where "in each context there are different forms of knowledges and of ignorances put into play" (Smith and Watson 14). As Evans remarks, "It is this kind of blurring of the lines between fact and fiction that can make auto/biography so unreliable" (24). What is at stake, however, are the emancipatory productivity and possibilities of autobiographical diasporic subjects to engage in a continuum of feminist oppositional critique.

Self-narration

Discussing the universal subject in traditional autobiographical work in the eighteenth century, Smith argues that bourgeois subjects who perceived themselves as "rational, free, autonomous, and 'middling,'" chronicled their progressive journeys toward intellectual and professional achievement and self-consciousness ("Universal" 18). This universal human subject and its normative masculine individuality, Smith writes, identified with rational thinking, a teleological reasoning of selfhood that "concedes nothing to indeterminacy, to ambiguity, or to heterogeneity" (8). Yet, Smith adds, the "democratic self" is grounded on "exclusionary practices," positioning on its

periphery "all that is 'colorful,' that is, that which becomes identified culturally as other, exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilized, regional, or paradoxically unnatural" (9 – 10). Consolidation of the privileged selfhood depends on the consolidation of marginalized identities, identities that are essentialized and "culturally embodied" ("Universal" 10). And so, the universal male subject makes use of autobiographical practice as "a way of accommodating and containing colorfulness":

> Through this practice he reaffirmed, reproduced, and celebrated agentive autonomy and disembodiment of the universal, valorizing individuality and separateness while erasing personal and communal interdependencies . . . . Woman, mother, and the feminine functioned in the text of traditional autobiography to signal the place of lost innocence, the forces of desire pressing upon the individual, or the source of salvation. They were part of 'the mess and clutter' of the nonidentical that the autobiographer had to clear out as he struggled toward self-identity and the narrative of a coherent past. ("Universal" 19)

By revising the generic conventions of autobiography, that is, inscribing an "I," a material self of an "exilic/immigrant third world woman" ("Language" 48), Lim participates in refashioning herself, to paraphrase Smith's terms, and engages "dialogically with the cacophonous voices of cultural discourses," speaking the unspeakable and resisting the cultural and racial inscriptions of the female body ("Universal" 21). Writing in English, a language that does not belong to her, Lim engages in "a struggle to extricate a valuable sense of self-in-language from the

colonialist's etymological grip" (*White Moon* 121). If the power of the universal disembodied, masculine self relies on assigning embodiment to the Other, then installing corporeality and dismantling the social and political structures that perpetuate an immutable position of privilege to the white, disembodied American subject are tactics of intervention. To this effect, Lim's autobiographical narrative confronts the enforced body, a specific body overdetermined by social inscription, and directs attention to the illusion of the coherent body and its stable, finite, and unified identity. Lim's inscription of embodiedness on whiteness and her insistence on her own specific body, that is Asian, female, and "an Asian American in transition," dislodges the circuit of power to circulate, fix, and shift representations of the Asian body (qtd. in Wang 158). In the process of exposing a system and its invisible workings of the material body as well as the oppressive racialized identifications that mark her as alien in both Malaysia and America, Lim is deploying "'[i]mprovising guerilla tactics,'" to borrow William H. Epstein's term, which contest hegemonic discourses of universal subject and embodied subject (4).

Body, Gender, Race, and Sexuality

The taxonomy that links body to race and gender, and the network of practices that make her identity visible or invisible, are a constant concern in Lim's text, signifying her narrative agency to survive. For instance, Lim decides to look for a university position after fourteen years of remaining "invisible" (*White Moon* 223) in a suburban community college in Westchester County: "I needed to find another, more welcoming

America in which poetry, Asia, and woman could be accepted in the same body" (224).[51] By appropriating aspects of autobiography, that is, reporting her experiences and, at the same time, opening new ways of critically thinking the strategic organization of power and vision, Lim epistemologically confronts the materialist and historical conditions of her homelands, Malaysia and America.

The memoir introduces the reader to Lim during her childhood years in Malacca, a small town in Malaysia, detailing her family's Chinese and Anglophone cultures, her segue into an English education in a Catholic school system and in the university, her familial and sibling connections, her relationships with men, and her struggles in the U.S. as a student, teacher, and immigrant mother. By insisting on her situatedness in the social and by pointing to the materiality of the situation in which she finds herself, she reveals the specious coherence of her gendered and racialized positions. I am particularly interested in Lim's negotiations between a gendered position and racial identity in Malaysia and America, calling into question the idea of a coherent and stable identity. Specifically, the act of writing her life-story, a narrative anchored in migration geographies and the architecture of the communities that are her homes, destabilizes the notion that the received Malaysian and American cultures are monolithic, and at the same time, opens the possibilities of agency for immigrant women of color operating within a nexus of cultural and economic forces in the diaspora.

The Asian woman, Lim says, "is seldom an active agent except in the most

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[51] Lim taught at the Westchester Community College in New York (Sullivan, "Not Asia" 5).

domestic of situations, so for her the subject is often emptied of political content" ("Semiotics" 443). Upon coming to America, Lim insists on the veracity of her history and the exigencies of inscribing her identity as an Asian American woman, remembering and telling stories about her Malaysian homeland: "It has been imperative for me to make sense of these birthmarks; they compose the hieroglyphs of my body's senses" (*White Moon* 231).[52] As such, Lim's work is intimately enmeshed in her efforts to call for a feminist discourse that "must prepare women for struggle not comfort," which incorporates the voices of women of color as well as women from the Third World (*White Moon* 203). Calling for a revision of Euro-American feminist theory on gender/power relations, Lim posits:

> A critical feminist inquiry will subvert the unidirectional, univocal structuring of sexism as something that is done to women by men; instead, deessentializing gender attributes will permit us to note that sexism is also something that is done to Asian American men by U.S. society, sometimes with Asian American women as duplicitous agents. ("Complications" 125)

Lim also takes issue with continental feminists for neglecting the disempowered and disenfranchised Third World female body, a body subjugated by patriarchal economic

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[52] In its attention paid to the body and its biological determination, the memoir calls into question the tension between American cultural narratives and heterogeneous narratives of racialized immigrant subjects, who insist on questioning the social practices, laws, and policies of inclusion and exclusion that work to manage their bodies. Insisting on a material Asian self, Lim defines herself as "a Chinese Malaysian ethnic minority woman now resident in the United States" ("Language" 47). More recently, Lim identifies herself as "Malaysian American" ("Complications" 132).

power and deprived of subjectivity and voice: "the female body in most societies is still the locus of alienation, of male rape and pleasure and female pain, disease, and unwanted child-bearing. Many European and American feminists do not ask how the pleasures of their language, their utopian feminist projects, are perhaps related to the material dystopias, the awful and increasing silence from the majority of women, but chiefly women of color, in the world" ("Language" 47).

At the suburban college, Lim has to face the challenge of making her white students take her seriously as a teacher and getting through their dislike of her non-American accent: "I was always haunted by the feeling that the students, almost all of whom were white, saw me first as Asian before they saw me as a teacher. It was not my gender that got in the way but my nonwhiteness" (*White Moon* 214). The hypervisibility of Lim's Asian body calls attention to the important role of the specular in marking and stereotyping racial groups. Her narrative repeats incessantly the predetermined signifiers, from whiteness to American standard English, from the supposedly superior Eurocentric racial and cultural myth to the passionate challenging, whether of language, color, history, and identity, of America's political and social construction of the ascribed, non-Europeanized foreigner. Taking the reader through Malaysia and America, the narrative speaks of an invisibility at the hands of the larger society that exacerbates her isolation and alienation. If dislocation is a recurring mode conveyed in the narrative, then militant questioning of race and gender and writing politically are ways in which Lim gains an understanding of history and politics and acknowledges the material self, "the self, which is always already in exile, is also always already in birth" ("Semiotics" 450). Her predicament is grounded on strong ideas of

race and gender. My sense is that visibility and invisibility are both sides of the same coin: neither guarantees Lim automatic access to the teaching positions in Malaysia or America. To put it simply, whether she is in Malaysia or America, she is everywhere and nowhere.

Within the Confucianist Chinese Malaysian culture, the female body is policed by the community and her sexuality repressed to sustain the fabric of cultural identity. As Lim writes:

> While sex as intercourse may or may not be repressed in many Asian societies, the body itself, especially the female body, is socialized to be nonexpressive of its sexuality. In Malacca in the 1950s, this deliberate nonexpressiveness, valued as 'modesty' and inculcated through humiliation and familiar and public shame, was so naturalized that minor transgressions like a short skirt or a glimpse of breasts could damage a girl's reputation. Even today . . . . the woman covers herself and moves demurely, so that her body will not speak before the male voyeur. (*White Moon* 88 – 89)

In large part, the process of political maturation and recognition of material self for the Asian woman is put in place by both familial and educational apparatuses. Familial education is a conduit for the transmission of the bedrock of patriarchal values: the self-esteem of a woman rests on her physical attractiveness and sexuality, attributes that are important for securing a husband and subsequently, reproducing children and performing the role of mother and domestic wife in a closed, male-centered society.

But the reality of a discriminatory home sinks in with an awful finality on one of

the several rude reckonings that Lim experiences while studying at the University of Malaya, such as when she applied for the post of a local lecturer in an attempt to sustain her love and relationship with Iqbal. With an excellent academic track record, Lim thinks that she would get the position, which is ultimately offered to a Muslim male colleague: "I believed that the university preferred a male and a Muslim over a Chinese woman. For the first time I saw that the prejudices I had believed the product of small-town religious bigotry were systemic in Malaysian society. Worse, it became clear to me that merit was not the main criterion for professional status. In Malaysia, I would always be of the wrong gender and wrong race" (*White Moon* 133). For Lim, writing politically, throwing into relief what she calls "patriarchal excesses," and writing about the condition, meaning, and position of being a woman who is always constructed as part of a kinship system are ways of working out these issues and speaking for herself ("Asian-American" 46).

The exodus of thousands of Malaysians of Chinese descent following the May 13, 1969 race riots, including Lim, to other countries can be ascribed to a large extent to the hostility, violence, the "Malay-dominant race-preferential practice," and the discriminatory laws instituted by the Malaysian élite and government (*White Moon* 136). It makes sense that Lim's narrative is a constant negotiation of race and gender in not only America, but also in Malaysia—she offers recollections of balmy landscapes and anger at the injustice suffered by people without "Malay or Bumiputra privilege," who are accorded "governmental preferential treatment" (*White Moon* 136). The racial tensions and the massacres of Malaysian Chinese in 1969 are historical episodes that

gesture to the tensions and problematic of homeland, belonging, anger, and dislocation or dispossession.

Here and elsewhere in the text, Lim's sense of isolation and her feelings of anger are palpable, gesturing to the effects by which putatively raced and gendered identities are politically charged. In "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Audre Lorde opens her essay by defining racism and considering some of the attitudes and "interchanges" between women that resonate well in the context of Lim's strong emotion: "*Women respond to racism.* My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life (124; original emphasis). Here, Lorde encourages women to use the power of anger to enable "progress and change" (127). Similarly, Lim rejects passivity and makes no bones about rendering explicit her fury at the way her identity is marked by skin:

> There are many ways in which America tells you you don't belong .... A polite people, it is the facial muscles, the shoulder tension, and the silence that give away white Americans' uneasiness with people not like them. The United States, a nation of immigrants, makes strangers only of those who are visibly different, including the indigenous people of the continent. (*White Moon* 199)

According to Lorde, there is a need to "examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor" (130), and she argues that the "angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision" (131). Anger, then, may initiate a form of political

resistance to the "technology of power"[53] and the effects of discrimination that translate into domination of the racialized body. Lim's face-off with Mr Gruber, the dean at the suburban community college, betokens an anger at the "vested interests of gatekeepers" at the college, and her failure to get promotion to full professorship (*White Moon* 223). Despite Lim's success in receiving fellowships, lecturing at various universities around the world, and engaging in cultural production, she remains "invisible" at her own college (*White Moon* 223)[54]. Following the "violence of the dialogue" with Mr Gruber, who clearly becomes unhinged at her audacity, Lim writes to the college president relating the confrontation (*White Moon* 224). Anger at the injustice she suffers at the hands of Mr Gruber also precipitates Lim to leave the college for a position at a university. Lim refuses to be a victim of racism and prejudice in America: "For if Asian Americans are not convinced of their right to American identity, how can they struggle against those who are only too willing to deprive them of those rights?" (*White Moon* 210). Living in a racially stratified world, I read the text as an angry voice

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[53] In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduces the lexicon, the "technology of power," to theorize how observatory equipment and experiments enable the techniques of surveillance and the production of knowledge and power (23). Tactics of surveillance and discipline enable "the apparatuses and institutions, in a sense, a micro-physics of power" to rank, judge, and taxonomize individuals according to their visible characteristics (26). Foucault's concept of surveillance is relevant to understanding a politics of social visibility.

[54] Lim co-edited a collection of essays, *Power, Race, and Gender in Academe: Strangers in the Tower?*, that includes critical analyses and critical reflections on the complexities, prejudice and discriminatory practices in academia. I see this volume of essays as a gathering of various voices "talking back" to academe.

exploding the injustice, control, and policing "in and out of institutional borders" of America (*White Moon* 222).[55]

Reverberating throughout the text and beyond, the politics of skin and the notions of alien or foreigner that are predicated upon an essentializing biological typology of racial difference, are concerns that Lim contests. Considering the way in which contemporary women use the body through autobiographical narrative, Smith observes that "skin has much to do with autobiographical writing, as the body of the text, the body of the narrator, the body of the narratee, the cultural 'body,' and the body politic all merge in skins and skeins of meaning" ("The Bodies" 128). Here I want to introduce the body / skin / flesh as a technology of racial differentiation and nationalism and, therefore, a critical element in the articulation and valorization of Western culture. In his essay, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," Homi K. Bhabha contends that skin "is recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies" (78). As Bhabha points out, the "difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural—color as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural *'identity'*" (80; original emphasis). Skin, a signifier of stereotyped racial and cultural difference, then, enables the structuring of a value system that accords political and economic power to

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[55] Lim's confrontation with Mr Gruber demonstrates that she refuses to practice what Ruth Hsu calls "internal kung fu," a Chinese etiquette "in which we use polite verbiage and phrasing, an objective facial expression and tone of voice, and in which we are to be as agreeable and non-confrontational as possible" (104).

the ruling power, such that race continues to play a major role in the cultural construction of the immigrant.

The Grotesque Body

For Lim, her cognizance of skin and color, and by extension, race, is shaped by her primary school teachers in Malaysia, who are mainly European expatriates or Eurasian Catholics. Fascinated and drawn to Mrs Damien, Lim describes how she is mesmerized by this woman:

> The Eurasian teachers were physically distinguished from me. I learned this in Primary Two with Mrs Damien, a white-haired, very large woman whose fat dimpled arms fascinated me. While she demonstrated how to embroider a daisy stitch as we crowded around her chair, I poked my finger into the dimples and creases that formed in the pale fresh that flowed over her shoulders and sagged in her upper arms. She was a fair Eurasian who dressed as a British matron, in sleeveless flowered print frocks with square-cut collars for coolness. Her exposed arms and chest presented dazzling mounds of white flesh that aroused my ardent admiration. I do not remember learning anything else in her class. (*White Moon* 68)

This primal scene, its attention to flesh and to an erotics of female identification, is a grotesque embodiment of the white female body as well as Lim's sexual self-consciousness. Women's sexuality has been suppressed and in want of expression, and,

especially in Confucianist patriarchy, women are trained to feel ashamed of their physical desires and bodies (*White Moon* 156 – 157). Female sexuality finds its boldest textual inscription in Lim's textual visualization and specular erotics of the white female body under the gaze of a woman of color.[56] Against the patriarchal hold on women's expression of sexuality in Asia, Lim inscribes female sexual awakenings in the text and suggests her desire to experience the privileges of Mrs Damien's white body. Moreover, the homoerotically-charged elaboration of Mrs Damien's white fleshy body comes from the gaze of a woman of color, who enjoys her gaze with passion. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write: "In the classical discursive body were encoded those regulated systems which were closed, homogeneous, monumental, centered and symmetrical" (22). While the classical body represents the "high," the grotesque physical body, with its orifices and corpulent flesh, stands for the "low" (22, 23). Mrs Damien's "erotic and obscene" body, a "grotesque" or "low" body that assumes superiority within the public space, clearly generates a mix of homoerotic desire, sensations and pleasure in Lim's body (10). What Lim fantasizes is to experience and claim the privileges of Mrs Damien's white body in place of her own racialized, and so "low" body. Destabilizing the idealization of white female beauty, Lim realigns Mrs Damien's fleshy, dimpled, and creased body with the mechanisms of desire, that is, the female body as a site of desirable excess.

Lim also depicts the grotesque bodies of Jason and Brenda in the narrative,

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[56] Mary Russo argues that the "female body as grotesque" such as the aging body and the irregular body, might be activated "to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty, or to realign the mechanism of desire" (65).

connecting her work to Mikhail Bahktin's concept of the Rabelaisian grotesque in *Rabelais and His World.* I want to outline briefly Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in order to read the way in which Lim situates the textual visualization of the white fleshy body within a carnivalesque narrative tradition. The tables have been turned and Lim returns with a vengeance, transgressing the conventions of the privileged, normative white subject, and deploying "grotesque realism" to construct the unromanticized, vulgar, embarrassing, Rabelaisian bodies of Jason and Brenda (Stallybrass and White 8). According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque dismantles hierarchies, classes, conventional rules, and restrictions, generating a different form of life in which the socially marginalized becomes the privileged site of inversion. The implications of this are that the excluded can play out fantasy roles and enact the desires of the material body without restrictions. The grotesque images in Rabelais are "in flagrant contradiction with the literary and artistic canon of antiquity" (Bakhtin 28): "they are ugly, monstrous, hideous," opposed "to the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25). The emphasis of the grotesque body rests on the topographical lower stratum: "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (26). In this act of gross exaggeration and hyperbole, the grotesque body bears the attributes of "excessiveness, superabundance" (306).

Such preoccupation with body and skin resurfaces when Lim lives with roommates, Jason and Brenda Clinken, a young married Canadian nudist couple, in Waltham, Massachusetts. Jason, an anthropologist, calls Lim "a foreigner," while

Brenda condescendingly treats her like "a half-wit" (*White Moon* 142). As she did with Mrs Damien, Lim depicts their naked bodies in detail:

> Her body [Brenda's] was very white, dotted with pink pigment, and red-gold hair hung in a bush covering her mound and peeked from under her armpits. So much white-pink skin! Her stomach folded in layers over her thighs as she sat on the one large armchair, legs tucked primly under her, knitting and watching television in the living room. Jason's skin was ruddier, his round belly firmer. A red hairy bush like hers hung over his genitals, a baby replica of the tangle of hair which grew luxuriantly over his face. His pale blue eyes and small partially visible lips were those of a young boy . . . . I shivered under three sweaters and my blanket, sitting up all night with a pot of black brewed coffee and a box of corn flakes, writing poetry spitefully, writing against Brenda's daily clicking knitting needles, her condescending green cat-eyes set above the pendulous swinging white breasts with their brown staring nipples. (*White Moon* 143)

In this, Lim's pronounced description, the surplus corporeality and whiteness are in tension with Brenda's and Jason's representation as sexualized subjects. Within a web of visual economy, skin, breasts, and genitalia are strategically invoked in order to deflate the notions of flesh and skin as sites of knowledge about race and the terms of political visualization. I see Lim's carnivalesque depiction of white flesh as strikingly daring—for an Asian American woman writer—in the way she approaches the body, race, and

gender. Examining the workings of discipline in the formation of knowledge and power in *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault writes, "Disciplinary power . . . is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them" (187). By installing her gaze at an intersection of race and knowledge/power, and teasing the white gaze with her own oppositional gaze, Lim takes Foucault's "economy of visibility" further and shows how bodies and interiority are rendered visible through surveillance (187). From a raced, "low," and marginalized positionality, Lim remobilizes and revises the politics of vision, rendering the invisible power of discipline visible and making white bodies seeable as corporeal subjects through a transformed technique of visual intelligibility.

I invoke Foucault's notion of visibility and discipline not to chart an exact correspondence between his theory and Lim's description of Jason and Brenda but, rather, to inform an analysis of how Lim deploys the techniques of visualization and the "apparatus of writing," to cite Foucault's words, in relation to power, identity, and subjectivity (190). Discussing the idea of documentary techniques, Foucault writes,

> To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege . . . . The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination. (191)

Foucault's theorization of visibility and the techniques of managing bodies resonates with the ways in which race is articulated throughout Lim's text. In theory, the white body is

an abstract and non-corporeal. Like a camera that slowly zooms in for a close-up on Brenda's body and, then, pulls back to offer a cinematic zoom of Jason's body, Lim creates an alternative way of seeing white bodies, a contemporary re-vision. In her graphic depiction of Jason's and Brenda's bodies in all their glorious nakedness, Lim is not inscribing a simplistic reversal of subject positions, in which they are surveilled as "Other" rather than she. Instead, she is appropriating Eurocentric narrative codes and conventional forms of representation found in canonized literature, and throwing into high relief the power of the dominant to dictate descriptions of colored bodies, as evident in realist texts,[57] wherein the relations of power are insistently articulated between the visual and embodiment. As Foucault says, "This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objection and subjection" (192). In this sense, re-presenting Jason's and Brenda's bodies becomes a strategy of resistance in which the racialized structuring of American society is disrupted and the complex interaction between the visual and the corporeal is opened to rethinking, to transformation.

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[57] Lim attributes her identity formation to reading literature canonized by the British external high school exams, particularly in the 1950s, "English literature was a very solemn affair, reflecting the seriousness with which the British undertook to inculcate their civilization in us" ("Semiotics" 450). In her analysis of American literature, Toni Morrison argues that "'race' is still a virtually unspeakable thing" within the regime of racial discipline and discourse. Nineteenth-century writers, Morrison writes, could write about the Native American or African people "without fear of their 'talking back.' One could even observe them, hold them in prolonged gaze, without encountering the risk of being observed, viewed, or judged in return" (13). It is apparent that this aspect of reversing the dominant gaze and narrative modes is a context that Lim is very concerned with and that motivates the trajectory of her memoir. To this end, the memoir installs a racial presence and subjectivity in white American cultural and literary discourse. As Morrison argues, "invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum" (11).

Certainly, explicit corporeal images of Jason and Brenda are not used simply to spice up the narrative, but their bodies become the objects of what hooks calls a "critical gaze," "one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional" (*Black Looks* 116). Endowed with white skin and reproductive organs, Jason's and Brenda's bodies and sexuality are tempered by the text's playful depiction, a description that conjures images of excess. To put it another way, these images strip away the idealism of white representation, a discourse of white supremacy and identity politics in which white people continue to be invested. What I want to suggest is that Lim reveals the dialectical relation between these white abstractions and the embodiment of racialized and gendered subjects by dominant imaginaries. Recast in this passage is this hyper-embodied, surplus corporeality of white subjects, which is Lim's narrative strategy to seize control of the stereotypical ways in which non-white subjects are apprehended. As hooks argues, "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see" (*Black Looks* 116). The excess of flesh represents a politicized, oppositional looking, a way of gaining control by destabilizing the distinctions and boundaries that sustain high culture and low culture, especially of the visual arts in the classical tradition.

At stake is the text's re-presentation of white bodies as a subject of amusement, deidealization, and debasement, bodies which are unmarked in racial ideology and against which colored bodies are defined and regulated. From Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White write that we learn that the excess and corporeality of the grotesque body are fundamental to carnival laughter (8). The bodies of Jason and Brenda are topographically magnified and degraded in the Bakhtinian sense "to concern oneself with

the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" (Bakhtin 21). This moment of textual zoom draws attention to what Stallybrass and White would call the "corpulent excess" of Brenda's body and the infantilization of Jason's body, placing their "bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete" "corporeal bulk" within the field of visibility (9). In addition, the depiction of white bodies gestures to the interests of economic mobility and social differentiation that the investment in whiteness perpetuates and embodies. The pivot of Lim's making visible the grotesque body is to disrupt whiteness as political and social power in discourse. By injecting humorous and irreverent elements into the narrative, Lim focuses on the process of undermining the modes of evaluation that consolidate and interpellate subjectivities in America. As Renae Moore Bredin puts it, "to mark 'white' bodies in some way, to make them 'the focus of study,' to denaturalize 'whiteness,'" is tantamount to engaging in "guerilla ethnography," "the making of a picture of what it means to be culturally white by one who is not" (230).

Speaking as a Chinese Malaysian Woman

In clarifying the feminist notion of "epistemic privilege for the oppressed" in "Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotion and Political Practice," Uma Narayan argues that members of an oppressed group "know first-hand the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives" (36). She maintains that the claim to epistemic privilege for the oppressed does not imply the inability of people who do not belong to the oppressed group to comprehend the experiences of the oppressed. Moreover, she cautions that the

knowledge the oppressed have of their sufferings is "'incorrigible,'" since the oppressed, "like human subjects in general, can always be mistaken about the nature of their experience" (Narayan 37). Rather than suggesting that the insights and experiences of the oppressed are off-limits to non-members or "outsiders" of the oppressed group, Narayan contends that they "will have to make a great deal of effort to come to grips with the details of lived oppression" (37). If, as hooks says, radical black women, as members of an oppressed group, need to document their stories and share the process of transformation, then Lim's narrative also represents just such a courageous voice, a voice of anger, that "[has] gone against the grain to assert nonconformist politics and habits of being" (*Black Looks* 59). In the memoir as well as critical essays, Lim insists on her racial and gender identities repeatedly, a "specificity" that "resists the pressure of institutional explanations, and so resists the replacement of the individual woman with her universalized and canonized figure as third-world victim, which is the way that the woman of color is put into Western discourse" ("Language" 48). In this specification of identities, there is more at stake for Lim than simply resistance in diasporic America. I argue that Lim's tripartite construction of her identity is both strategic and tactical because it opens new possibilities of a process of engaging with political and ethnic coalition, and because it allows Lim and her literary productions to enjoy a fluid transnational mobility in interstitial spaces, spaces in which power structures and gate-keeping are pervasive.

Positing the concept of identity as "not . . . essentialist, but . . . strategic and positional" in "Who Needs Identity?", Stuart Hall argues that identities "are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (3, 4). Hall's formulation of identities also

informs my reading of Lim's invocation of identities—woman, Asian, Malaysian, and Asian American (*White Moon* 225, 227). For Hall, identity is about deploying the "resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall 4). Lim's identities are not only "*in transition*," to cite Hall, but she must also learn to "translate and negotiate" between at least two identities and languages ("Cultural Identity" 310; original emphasis). From Lim's feminist perspective, she relates the cultural constructions of ethnicity and gender to what she terms the "tripartite construction of Asian American identity" : "The feminist intervention in the evolving tradition of this [Asian American] writing has led to a reclamation of mother/other origin, an affirmation of continuity or relation between origin and present tense, and a new foregrounding of gender identity" ("Complications" 112 – 113). Along with this affirmative marking of difference, the strategic invocation of identities has discursive and material consequences for Lim in geopolitical sites and tertiary institutions of learning.

Although Lim's first book of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula*, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980, catapulting her to prominence internationally, particularly in Southeast Asia, her literary works exploring the Malaysian homeland are read and studied only by a Southeast Asian audience (Sullivan 2). While Lim resides in America, she continues to write as a Malaysian writer, publishing many volumes of fiction and poems mostly in Great Britain (Watson 154). It was only in the late 1990s that her poetry, short stories, and novels found an American reading audience. Traveling frequently to Southeast Asia to "refresh" her "original literary identity," to take on

research fellowships and teaching, it is no surprise that Lim is "filled with an ineffable sense of completion, a satiety of recognitions" because not only does she have her "community" of siblings and "fellow writers," she has her audience of readers outside America (*White Moon* 209). Exemplary of such affiliative affect is her use of the vernacular, that is in the modification to the subtitle of *Among the White Moon Faces* to *Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, offering an intimate register and local flavor to the text. This, to an extent, is a question of the politics of linguistic relations of power. Within the broad framework of English and Literature in the Southeast Asian academe, it is precisely due to Lim's linguistic and intellectual (educated in both Malaysia and America), cultural, and national (born in Malaysia) location that her works are canonized in the Postcolonial Literature pantheon.[58] Identified as a Malaysian, Asian American, and woman, Lim's academic credibility, linguistic competence, and cachet of American nationality are enhanced in the discursive world of Commonwealth Literature in the Southeast Asian curriculum, where geopolitical realism, voice, experience, language, race, and gender lend an aura to transdisciplinary and translocal theoretical discourses and inquiry. Such tripartite identities take on the import of transnational and transcultural intellectualism, wherein Lim, on leave from the University of California,

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[58] For example, Lim is one of the key literary figures in the English and Literature (the designation used for English in Southeast Asia) curriculum at the National University of Singapore. As well, Lim's literary productions are relevant to a course like Southeast Asian Writing in English, a course comprising the study of indigenous, Peranakan and oral literary forms and texts. See the Postcolonial Web at http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/singapore/literature/authors.html

Santa Barbara, took up a two-year appointment as Chair and Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong in July 1999 (Kirpal Singh 137).[59] To put it simply, Lim's tripartite construction of Asian American identity has the effect of grounding her position as an academic in the contingencies of concrete transnational sites, particularities, and specificities.

Feminist Concerns "Here" and "There"

By investing in a discursive conception of identities, Lim strategically uses these positions to address political, racial, and social issues Asian Americans confront. In New York City, Lim interrogates the questions of race, knowledge, and power, reflecting a feminist commitment to critique the ways in which the racialized bodies of men and women are entrapped and marginalized socially and economically. Narrating her stint at Hostos Community College in New York City, Lim throws into relief a series of

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[59] The connection between language and racial identity is echoed in the memoir: "As a thoroughly English-educated mind, emptied of Chinese racialized sentiments, I was a mold into which the idealism of a progressive multiracial identity could be poured. Chinese chauvinism offended me as much as other racisms, for, although of Chinese descent, I was usually treated by Malayan Chinese speakers as foreign, alien, and worse, decadent, an unspeakable because unspeaking, degenerate descendent of pathetic forebears" (*White Moon* 122). In a December 1999 interview conducted in Hong Kong, Lim makes a related point that she has never thought of herself as Chinese. Rather, she always thinks of herself as Malaysian first, then as American. As Lim explains, "Hong Kong is linguistically chauvinistic," so that she is "marked as different" because she cannot speak Cantonese (qtd. in Fox 6). While she finds Hong Kong "very exciting and stimulating" for her, it is "comforting" when she returns to Malaysia and Singapore (7). In other words, Hong Kong has used language, that is Cantonese, as a boundary marker of inclusion and exclusion, pointing to how lines of affiliation are drawn and policed within Chinese communities. Clearly, language plays a role in diasporic fracturing as well as in regulating communal belonging, in which the question of communal identity is also one of language.

questions that highlight the incommensurability of social formations and institutional policies about racial difference, segregation, education, and work. Populated by Puerto Rican and black students, the Community College functions as "a holding pen that kept black and brown students out of the established campuses of The City University of New York" (*White Moon* 170). The narrative politicizes the geographical sites, demography, and architecture of campus and community—Lim's homes and places of work at different periods of her life—by problematizing her own complex positioning within and without academia and exposing the layers of exploitation and struggles of diverse groups of people who also call these sites homes. As a "beneficiary of the civil rights redress," Lim understands that her teaching position is "earned on the backs of black, brown, and working-class activists," but it becomes evident to her that race is class-associated: "But the distance between my townhouse and the college was more than miles—it was the distance between an already secured middle class and a dispossessed class, between someone already marked with entry, no matter how tenuous, into U. S. privilege and those who were still denied entry" (*White Moon* 170). In broaching the social oppression of these marginalized ethnic communities, Lim attempts to move beyond the perspective that seems accessible to her, that of the colonial, Western-educated, professional middle-class subject, to comprehend their struggles, hopes, and idealism. By evaluating her class position and privilege of speaking, Lim confronts all the complexities and contradictions of her Asian American identity, as well as the ways in which women are oppressed and how they are imbricated in systems and practices that oppress women and men, pointing to the hierarchical social structures that confer power and status to who can speak and who can be heard. Through her life-writing, Lim gains

self-knowledge and, simultaneously, reflects on the notion of self and issues that pertain to "identity and integrity": "There are always these paradoxically and deeply implicated embedded systems where I am myself, not only an oppressed person, but perhaps an oppressor, caught within the system" (qtd. in Wang 155). This critical assessment of her own ambivalent positionality, then, suggests an awareness of the possibilities of her complicity in levels of oppression. But having said that, Lim is very susceptible to eliding the Third World woman in her memoir.

In an interview, Lim notes that during her visits to Malaysia, she sees the economy "growing much more rapidly and in better ways than in the United States," and she "mak[es] certain cultural changes and decisions" that serve to provide "new material" for her writing (qtd. in Wang 162). Although Lim resurrects the Peranakan culture and tropical landscapes of Malaysia in her writing, she cautions against being perceived as a representative of Asian women or Malaysian women writers: "I never claim to speak for Malaysian women because I know that in Malaysia, there are different kinds of women—different ethnic identities" (qtd. in Manaf 13). Indeed, in her volatile relationship with Iqbal, who tells Lim to leave his apartment during his Punjabi mother's visit, Lim describes herself "like the live-in Malay maid whose place in the apartment was functional and without rights" (*White Moon* 130). By categorizing the domestic labor of women in racial terms, Lim inadvertently colludes in conflating two elements: racial- and gender-specific identities and occupation, and puts herself in an untenable position.

Telling of her short stay in her brother's home in Penang in 1974, Lim writes:

"My sister-in-law's maid took care of laundry, meals, and house cleaning" (*White Moon* 173). It is understood in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong that live-in maids have been imported from the rural areas of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. In the transnational domestic labor industries, women's bodies are exploited for extracting surplus value. Frequently, live-in maids are abused by their employers.[60] While Lim's brother and sister-in-law have acquired a certain level of economic and social power, enjoying upward mobility, she does not lead us to an examination of the complex material inequalities and contradictory experiences of working-class women of color in Asia, who leave behind their husbands and children in their respective homelands to eke out a living in the diaspora. I do not mean to suggest that Lim is blind to the oppression of working-class women in Malaysia, but rather, I feel a sense of unease with her posture of insouciance and her casual treatment of the maid's role and the extraction of Third World women's surplus labor.

Reflecting on an invitation to speak at Brown University in "The Ambivalent American: Asian American on the Cusp," Lim raises the issue of speaking and writing as a scholar and representative of Asian Americans and of women: "So I wrote with an ambivalent mind: resisting the aura of tokenism and the unspoken assumption that I should write for a minority group, yet acknowledging the implication that I will claim

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[60] See, for example, John Gittings, "Filipino maids burned by Hong Kong employers"; and "Filipino Overseas Workers." For critical discussion of Third World women workers, see Cynthia Enloe, "'Just Like One of the Family': Domestic Servants in World Politics"; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity"; and Geraldine Heng, "'A Great Way to Fly': Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism."

access on behalf of a muted[61] social group to a public conversation" (14). In her memoir, interviews, and critical essays, Lim is right to recognize the privileges and access to social power of speech that academia affords her, and to refuse to appropriate and totalize the material bodies of Asian American or Third World women. Certainly, Lim highlights with remarkable passion the struggles of marginalized people "here" in New York City, but fails to make the connection with the traffic in underpaid domestic labor over "there" in Asia. I suggest that Lim's blind spot to the exploitation of women's labor in Asia might be read as strategic silences, acts of "tacit constraints," which serve to maintain family ties in Malaysia and Singapore, as well as to protect her own academic interests (Eakin 114). Lim herself alludes to the culture of "coercion" that she was raised in, and along with the "actual, political censorship out there," admits to "a real embodied fear of speaking up" ("Reticence" 5).[62] What I am arguing is that there

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[61] Alluding to those individuals "on the margins or outside the circles of power," in the preceding paragraph, Lim writes: "Thus the human birthright of speech can be made mute, silenced by sociopolitical structures. Language achieves little if it is denied listeners. One may express, create, discover, but how does one move, inform, persuade, protest without an audience? How can speech give the speakers access to social power without social permission?" (14).

[62] Issues of women's bodies as entertainment objects, Indonesian women manufacturing Nike shoes, and mail-order brides have been taken up by Lim in her critical essays, most notably in relation to transnationalism and global capitalism. In *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Space,* Lim includes topics on Third World labor. See Rolando B. Tolentino, "Bodies, Letters, Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Space," for a brief mention of transnational Filipino women domestic workers. Lim's occlusion of domestic racial otherness is surprising, given her preoccupation with the cultural inscription of race and global feminism, and her failure to attend to the problems of transnational domestic labor as well as the material reality of maids might be disempowering for Third World women of color. Bearing in mind that Lim is considered a "Singaporean author" may help explain her blind spot (Sullivan, "Not Asia" 1). As Lim herself has commented in "The English-Language Writer in Singapore" (1989), "The Singapore writer seeks autonomy and freedom of artistic concerns from state-

are oppressive forces of laws as well as individual and familial interests that limit the speaking Lim can perform, that there is only so much she can do. As Smith says, "the autobiographer could never exercise complete control, or sovereign authority, over the kind of subject he presented to the public" ("Consolidation" 20).

Undermining the notion of cultural homogenization, the narrative talks back to structures of power and depicts a multilingual terrain, a polyglot site of foreign languages, accents, and non-standard American English. In particular, Lim returns the look of surveillance, destabilizing the unmarked, autonomous white subject, and undermining the discourses and technologies of racial essence. At issue here is the material and linguistic struggles of these racialized men and women residing in ghettoized communities, most of whom live on welfare and learn the English language as a way to strive for economic and social mobility. In this, Lim maps the contradictory experiences of America, a symbol of utopian society, and renders explicit the incoherence between a democratic rhetoric of inclusion and the realities of exclusion and discrimination.

I argue that *Among the White Moon Faces* seeks to re-vision a feminism in its

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dictated aims. Yet, because he is almost always university-educated and working in the Civil Service or in government-controlled institutions (as a teacher, professor, journalist, doctor, adminstrator, and so on), he belongs to the small, English-educated élite whose interests are inextricably bound up with governmental, bureaucratic aims and whose independence of action and thought consequently is constrained" (540 – 541). Respected in Asia and a role model of successful womanhood, it is not particularly a stretch to say that Lim has been a part of the academic establishment, and a product of her affiliations and identifications. For an excellent discussion of a general retreat from speaking for others and the impetus to speak, see Linda Martin Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others."

dialectical modes of critique and to deploy its practices in addressing the diversity of voices that traverse the borders of race and culture in America. In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation,* hooks outlines the objectives of her text: "I cross boundaries to take another look, to contest, to interrogate, and in some cases to recover and redeem . . . . To claim border crossing, the mixing of high and low, cultural hybridity, as the deepest expression of a desired cultural practice within multicultural democracy means that we dare to envision ways such freedom of movement can be experienced by everyone" (5). Rather than pursuing a victimization paradigm, *Among the White Moon Faces* favors an outlaw reaction similar to hooks, and sets out to open up contradictions and complications within America, in which the technology of racialization becomes a discursive sign of differentiating practices that Lim can remotivate. In her essay "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" Alice Walker writes,

> Perhaps black women who are writers in the twenty-first century will present a fuller picture of the multiplicity of oppression—and of struggle. Racism, sexism, classism, and colorism will be very much a part of their consciousness. (311 – 312)

*Among the White Moon Faces* is a gesture toward articulating the struggle to survive and to create a space for the birth of the self by naming Lim's experiences, speaking the unspeakable, extending and transgressing discursive boundaries, writing in female and Asian terms, and engaging in redrawing more sophisticated forms of feminist practice to include a fuller range of women's experiences. I argue that Lim cannot offer an adequate exploration of domestic labor playing a central role in the constellation of exploitation of women from developing countries, though her narrative of the working class in New

York City represents a sustained critique of oppression. Lim's prose is tendentious, documenting a history of the struggle over her own ordeals in the diaspora, exposing oppressive conditions and issues at stake, and using her memoir as a form of political intervention.

As hooks says, a feminist theory "will always challenge, shake us up, provoke, shift our paradigms, change the way we think, turn us around" (*Feminist Theory* xiv – xv). Challenging women to learn from each other in her critique of white feminist theory in "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," Yamada writes, "I am still hopeful that the women of color in our country will be the link to Third World women throughout the world, and that we can help each other broaden our visions" (75). *Among the White Moon Faces* is generally consistent with Lim's idea of the memoir as "a very strong social-political instrument," transgressing the "culture of reticence" ("Reticence" 5). Even Lim with her best intention toward Third World women of color and her critique of the ways in which they have been exploited, appears incapable of rendering them visible, of giving them space in her memoir, a text that situates her own experience within a structural analysis of race, class, and gender oppression. This notwithstanding, self writing becomes an empowering and liberatory practice, an ongoing process of talking back to the structures of power for the purpose of political, social, and discursive transformation. Because Lim's memoir arises out of a tradition of American feminist

"out-law genres"[63] and struggle, it is possible to situate her text within a corpus of Asian American writing emerging in the 1990s that depicts a woman moving away from the discursive status of passivity to redefining of the self and articulating with "a political voice," capable of seizing control of how history is to be remembered and, more importantly, seeing herself as agent rather than simply as body ("Reticence" 3).

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[63] The term "out-law genres" is borrowed from Caren Kaplan's discussion of "feminist writing strategy in the context of transnational affiliations among women" (116). Kaplan writes: "Out-law genres renegotiate the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history. Here, narrative inventions are tied to a struggle for cultural survival rather than purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression" (130).

# Conclusion

In this thesis, I seek to explore how Asian American diasporic subjects, who are objects of racialized and gendered projections, challenge and reimagine their cultural and sexual identities. I begin with an examination of the father figure and of the familial zone whose stability depends on healthy heteronormativity, masculinity, filial piety, and women as reproducers of culture. Focusing on texts that exceed the geopolitical terrain of America but still bespeak a context in which the U. S. matters, I investigate how their discursive strategies destabilize the systems of power/knowledge that mark racialized subjects, and, at the same time, engage in a politics of re-vision. I consider the economic, intellectual, and political role and usefulness of cultural identity in my reading of three Asian American works, situating its configuration in a transnational context, under diasporic pressure, and global capitalism. These three texts, all taken from the 1990s, are by no means representative of the many different kinds of Asian diasporic texts. Rather, they demonstrate the complicated relationships that exist between diasporic spaces and gender, class, power, and sexualities. Because of political change, different geographical locales, and disciplinary mechanisms, cultural identity remains contingent, transitional, and strategic.

In *The Wedding Banquet,* the closeting of sexuality enables an illusion of domestic tranquility, even as it demystifies the romantic imaginings of the family in the diaspora. I discuss how the closet resolves the anxieties of bloodline and heteronormativity, especially when the diaspora is heavily invested in heterosexual identity, a sexuality that is associated with morality. At the same time, the closet also

effects a destabilization of traditional norms of femininity and sexual identity. I explore how filial piety requires children to obey and respect their parents. To get an analytical purchase on the positioning and closeting of identities in these works, I draw on Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discipline. I then move on to *Porcelain,* and examine the relationships between sexual practice and architecture of homoerotic social space. John, scorned as a British Chinese, a homosexual, and a murderer, has already fallen outside the boundaries of prescriptive masculinity espoused by his father, Mr Lee, a name that recalls the former premier of Singapore who is also the nation's father of founding fathers. Violating legislative restriction that prohibits gay men below age 21 from engaging in consensual sexual activity, John's crime gestures to a resistance against the state's strenuous containment and regulatory mechanisms such as hygienic policing and the track of power on bodies, and entrapment operations in public restrooms and cruising areas. Surveillance tactics and frequent social cleansing of the water closet also inform users that it is always already a precarious site of pervasive violence. To disavow the violence enacted in the name of social order in the heterosexual matrix, Dr Worthing, an enforcer of normative sexual conduct, puts John in his "place" and in jail, a site of containment. I explore how *Porcelain* addresses the way in which a British Chinese man's life intersects with discrimination and social convention, the age of consent politics, the fragility and incoherence of paternal authority, and the media's and the father of the law's invasive penetration.

From examining two narratives that focus on the reinscription of, and intervention in, paternal authority and law of the father as well as the thematic concerns of homosexuality, I next turn to *Among the White Moon Faces.* Lim takes aim at the

ideological apparatuses in both Malaysia and America that oppress and circumscribe racialized minorities. The paradox of racial marginalization made much of by Lim in her memoir shows that her visibility as a woman of color renders her invisible in academe. To associate Lim with invisibility is something of an anachronism these days, but Lim's emphasis on the hegemonizing discourse about Asia refracted through racial and gendered difference deserves attention. I discuss the way Lim takes on the masculine privilege of the white gaze, appropriating its power to produce new knowledge of previously unmarked white bodies, and liberating herself from white specularization and control. Yet Lim complicates the way she interrogates gender hierarchy and stratification of America's racialized practices toward different minority groups. By marking a Third World woman in racial terms and by eliding an account of the gendering of domestic labor in Malaysia, Lim undermines the intelligibility of her rigorous attention to feminist critique and to her politics of re-vision. I would emphasize the importance of an ongoing gender critique that questions the transnational circulation of female domestic workers and confronts their material and social realities.

I consider the ways in which Lee, Yew, and Lim negotiate identities in the diaspora with alternative constructions of characters circulating around issues of gender, race, and sex. For the most part, criticism of Asian American texts tends to gloss over issues of sexuality, especially the question of how same-sex desires and non-procreative sexuality inform the relationships among male subjects, family, masculinity, and diasporic community. My study of diasporic texts aims to contribute to a growing body of criticism that includes the gendered, sexual, and transnational terrains of Asian American cultural critique. I also attempt to take into account the affective, material,

political, and social realities that identity categories narrate, enabling us to reconsider concepts about bodies, erotic desires and sexual practices, diasporic connections, and gender performativity in a way that attends to both the contradictions and the disruptions of hegemonic identifications and representations.

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